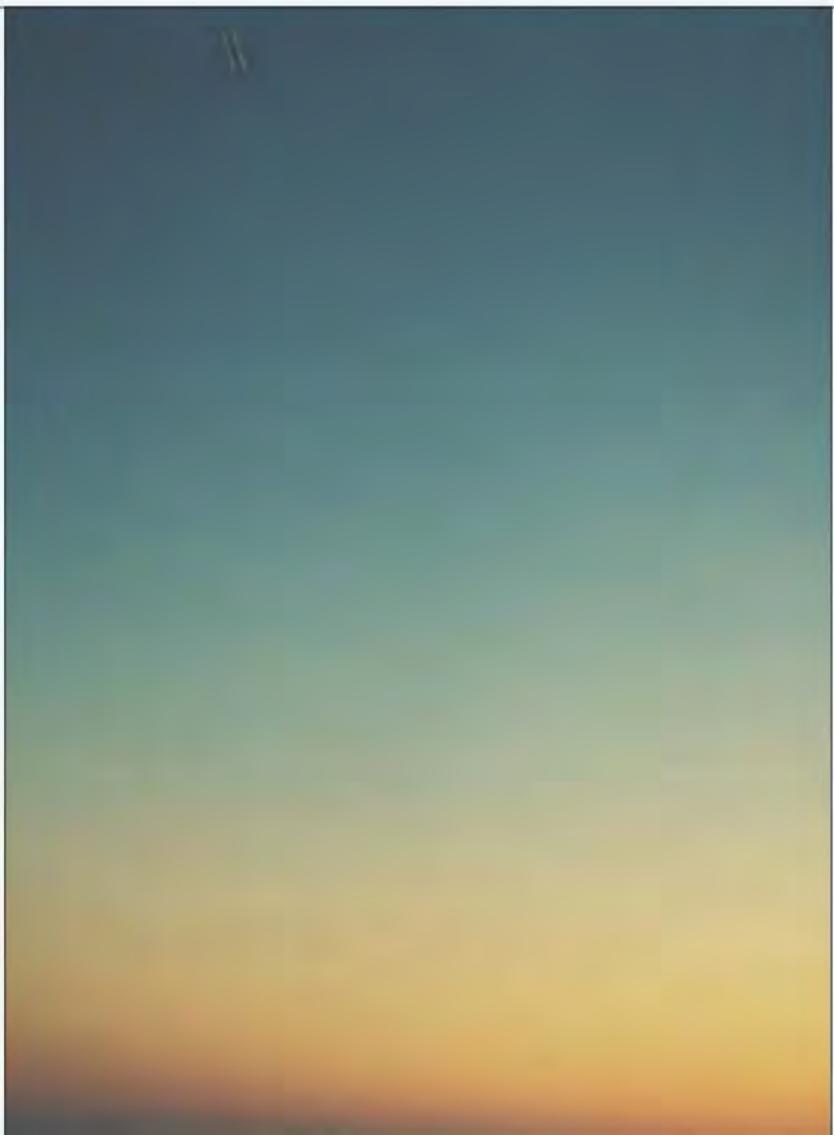


The Frontiers of Theory

# Death-Drive

Freudian Hauntings  
in Literature and Art

Robert Rowland Smith



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The Frontiers of Theory

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# Death-Drive

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Freudian Hauntings in Literature and Art

Robert Rowland Smith

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Chapter 7: Samuel Beckett, photographed by John Miniham (1985) © John Minihan.

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I dedicate the book to the memory of Jacques Derrida.

## *Note on the Text*

Several chapters have appeared in earlier versions:

‘Memento Mori’, in *Angelaki*, 3: 3 (1998), 45–57, and in *Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis*, 10: 2 (1999), 63–82.

‘The Death Drive Does Not Think’, in *Common Knowledge*, 5: 1 (Spring 1996), 59–75, and, in abridged form, in *Post-Theory*, eds M. McQuillan, G. MacDonald, R. Purves and S. Thomson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 161–75.

‘A Subject Is Being Beaten’, in *Angelaki*, 3: 1 (1998), 187–96.

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‘Literature – Repeat Nothing’, in *The Question of Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Beaumont-Bissell (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 207–31.

## References

The most frequent reference throughout the book is to the following work:

Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated from the German under the General Editorship of James Strachey, in collaboration with Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1964). Twenty-four volumes.

This work will be cited in the following format: *SE*, VI, p. 217.

## *Series Editor's Preface*

Since its inception Theory has been concerned with its own limits, ends and after-life. It would be an illusion to imagine that the academy is no longer resistant to Theory but a significant consensus has been established and it can be said that Theory has now entered the mainstream of the humanities. Reaction against Theory is now a minority view and new generations of scholars have grown up with Theory. This leaves so-called Theory in an interesting position which its own procedures of auto-critique need to consider: what is the nature of this mainstream Theory and what is the relation of Theory to philosophy and the other disciplines which inform it? What is the history of its construction and what processes of amnesia and the repression of difference have taken place to establish this thing called Theory? Is Theory still the site of a more-than-critical affirmation of a negotiation with thought, which thinks thought's own limits?

'Theory' is a name that traps by an aberrant nominal effect the transformative critique which seeks to reinscribe the conditions of thought in an inaugural founding gesture that is without ground or precedent: as a 'name', a word and a concept, Theory arrests or misprisons such thinking. To imagine the frontiers of Theory is not to dismiss or to abandon Theory (on the contrary one must always insist on the it-is-necessary of Theory even if one has given up belief in theories of all kinds). Rather, this series is concerned with the presentation of work which challenges complacency and continues the transformative work of critical thinking. It seeks to offer the very best of contemporary theoretical practice in the humanities, work which continues to push ever further the frontiers of what is accepted, including the name of Theory. In particular, it is interested in that work which involves the necessary endeavour of crossing disciplinary frontiers without dissolving the specificity of disciplines. Published by Edinburgh University Press, in the city of Enlightenment, this series promotes a certain closeness to that spirit: the continued

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exercise of critical thought as an attitude of inquiry which counters modes of closed or conservative opinion. In this respect the series aims to make thinking think at the frontiers of theory.

Martin McQuillan

## *Author's Preface*

Freud located the death-drive first in the psyche of the individual and later in the tendency of whole civilisations. An instinct that is ancient – and, although ultimately organic, not reducible to biology – compels or propels the individual and the civilisation into the arms of death. The instinct is internal rather than imposed – suicidal, for short. Unconsciously, we solicit and pursue our own death. It is this inalienable instinct which, in tandem with the instinct of Eros – the instinct for life, for energy, for bonding, for procreation – is definitive of the species as such, and holds such weight with Freud because it offers the master key to understanding human life and behaviour.

The theory of the death-drive is extraordinary – controversial, counter-intuitive and even by Freud's admission highly speculative – and much of the text that follows worries at Freud's assumptions, arguments and conclusions. In this sense I add modestly to the already large literature on the subject. But my focus is not on the life of human beings *per se*: it is on literature, painting, sculpture and photography. Now, readers of Freud well know that he thought much in print about Shakespeare, Leonardo da Vinci and Hellenic sculpture, among other things, so the project of 'applying Freud to literature and art' is hardly new (and many have tried since). So what's different about what I have to say?

Where Freud will by and large interpret a work of art as he will interpret a dream, as an artifact or token of the individual's psyche, a set of coded messages about its author's unconscious, my hypothesis is that artworks themselves can be seen as possessed of, or perhaps by, an unconscious of their own. I am saying that Freud's theory of the death-drive can be applied to artworks even though they are manifestly not organic or biological in the way that human beings are. After all, can an artwork die if it was never alive?

That question isn't entirely rhetorical. In fact, I take it at face value in the last chapter proper. Artworks do tend to live on; their longevity,

their ability to outlive their creator, is possibly axiomatic: so what is the status of their living on and how, justly, can it be told apart from a death? That is one line of argument from many in the chapters ahead, all of which explore the possibility that the death-drive is likely to be found as much in works of art as in the individual or collective psyche, and that, although it is humans who produce those works of art, they do not finally determine them. The death-drive finds its locus in the artwork as much as in the psychically vested human that has given birth to it.

In such unlikely places, I propose, the death-drive ‘appears’, but not as the vehicle or empty vessel of their author’s death instincts, nor as an observable phenomenon. In Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, for example (see Chapter 6 below), there is a deathly credulity or suggestibility operating on two levels. The first pertains to its hero. Macbeth’s belief in the prophecy of the witches that he will become king makes him vulnerable to his own death, more vulnerable even than when on the battlefield. Death ensues not from an empirical threat – even if Macbeth is empirically slaughtered at the end – but from the credit he affords the witches in his moment of transference with them. This is death in the form of rhetoric, if you will, artful or beguiling words based on nothing substantial, that threaten to undo the very substance of the person who lets himself hear them. Then, at a second, structural or metastructural level, the play as ‘literature’ opens itself up too, by allowing and giving credit to its own tragic story. This letting-happen on the part of literature takes place because literature exempts itself from the laws of knowledge, truth, fact and so on. Literature, like rhetoric (which may not be different) and other arts, belongs to the order of belief or faith rather than reason, and is therefore a ‘suggestible’ genre in principle. It exposes itself to the possibility of its own destruction, its own coming to an end, its random or autotelic self-interruptions and self-shapings. Because it believes in anything, it cannot always legislate against or discern that which might destroy it; yet it reserves the right to cut itself, cut itself off, cut itself short, at any point. It hovers in this free but perilous space. So the vulnerability not only confronts Macbeth with his own death, it also determines the very movement of the play as literature.

In order to promote, defend and elaborate my hypothesis, I run it through many other examples – Samuel Beckett, Ian McEwan, Mark Rothko, Katharina Fritsch, John Minihan – but always taking Freud’s late work on the death-drive as my origin, flying back to it, remaking, disturbing it again. The other axis is formed by some of the wider literature on death. To add rigour, depth and contrast to the particular readings, I bring into play Heidegger, Pascal, Derrida, Adorno, Durkheim and Foucault. I look, for example, at Heidegger’s claim in *Being and*

*Time* that the character of death is more one of possibility than actuality, and infer that the character of possibility would have to be one of imagination and rhetoric (these being 'artistic' or 'aesthetic' rather than existential or ontological categories). Death cannot be experienced as such, but it can be believed in; indeed it can only be believed in, which means that the character of death as it relates to humans must be rhetorical, a matter of promise or persuasion in the absence of a secure referent or signified. Just as death comes to us as something other than an event, so the death-drive arrives not as thought or concept but as fiction – we die partly because we believe we will die or, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, because we can never reduce the world to a collection of facts or even things. This is the drive of the death-drive, its persuasive attractiveness, its seductiveness: beautiful, so to speak, because it can't be tested or proved.

In sum, the book not only transposes Freudian notions of the death-drive into the creative realm broadly conceived, it also tries to redefine death in a new 'aesthetic' sense.

As for the chapters that make it up, they are certainly capable of being read independently of each other, but they are meant to form a discernible, if not heavily etched out, sequence. The introduction attempts to do three things: to give a preliminary account of Freud's theory of the death-drive; to provide a brief review of the literature that has reflected on that theory; and to set out first thoughts on the relationship between the death-drive and the aesthetic. The first chapter then goes back to philosophical basics (insofar as that's ever possible). *What is death, and how do we begin to think about it? What is its status as an object of thought?* I compare and contrast two distinctive and canonic approaches to the question, that of Pascal and that of Heidegger. For Pascal, classically, death is an actual event that we suffer. But Heidegger, as noted above, argues that thinking about death like this only gets you so far: better to conceive death as a perpetual possibility than an actuality. I enlarge upon Heidegger's answer to suggest that the status of death is more imaginary than real. I do this in order to argue death into the space of rhetoric or the artistic, where much of the argument of the following chapters takes place; I also seek to show that death cannot be just another object of thought.

Freud too links implicitly the idea of thinking to the possibility of death, and having established some philosophical frames of reference in the previous chapter, I now formally bring in psychoanalytic concepts. One of Freud's propositions concerning the death-drive is that it manifests itself in the human 'compulsion to repeat': he argues that because we haven't worked it through we tend to repeat what we don't

understand, so in effect repetition acts as a kind of blocker to thinking. What does that say about our capacity to make conscious choices or indeed to think at all? Again we come up against a nexus between death and something other than reason, something at the darker limits of understanding. In this respect Freud's work clearly challenges Enlightenment ideals about reason and choice, and I set his work in the context of two very different thinkers of the Enlightenment – the historian J. G. A. Pocock and the critical theorist Theodor Adorno – in order to draw out some implications.

That leads to questions of what counts as rational or irrational behaviour. On the surface, the death-drive cannot be rational: who in their right mind would ever wish for death? Is that really what Freud is talking about? And if so, why does he so rarely mention suicide? I attempt in this chapter to clear the matter up before returning to the main theme. After all, it makes for an odd de-link: on the one hand Freud speaks of the death-drive, but on the other hand he is virtually silent on suicide. What is the relationship between them, and where does masochism, which Freud famously is interested in, fit? I look at the paradoxes of Freud's position, and set it alongside two other great thinkers of suicide and punishment, Durkheim and Foucault. When it comes down to it, Freud's death-drive stops short of destroying life; it prefers a return to a simple state of inertia that is closer to preservation than annihilation.

'White Over Red', the following chapter, doesn't leave it there. It poses an obvious next question: if Freud largely excludes destruction from the death-drive, where does it go, and how does it relate to death, if at all? Freud's answer, in short, is sadism – but sadism, though it can lead to death (both homicide and suicide), seems to stand apart from the machinery of the death-drive. So is there anything deathly at all about death, anything that is violent, cruel or annihilating? One of Freud's subtlest readers, Jacques Derrida, has attempted to trace the residual violence in the death-drive, and he too links it with the aesthetic of a kind. I examine Derrida's argument and then modify it somewhat, taking Mark Rothko's painting *White Over Red* as a test case. We emerge with a classical conjunction of beauty and destruction affirmed, but in a mode that deviates from classic or classical aesthetics. The deathly beauty involved never appears as such, meaning that it never becomes available as an aesthetic object: its doing away with itself before coming to light is precisely what makes its beauty possible.

The flip side of destruction is creation, allegedly. Chapter 5 sets out to see if the two are really so different, and whether the nature of creativity doesn't also fall within the death-drive's compass. Freud's writings on art and literature argue that creative works are the disguises worn by wishes

that have been repressed, threads to guide us through the maze of the artist's mind back to its creative source. But so too, according to Freud, are less palatable phenomena such as obsessive-compulsive behaviour. Yet Freud balks again at making the connection, or at least he will not make it explicit, so my chapter imagines he had. I use Freudian logic against Freud, so to speak, reasoning that creative acts, stemming as they do from the unconscious, cannot be separated so hygienically from those more rebarbative endeavours that lead not to creation but to its supposed opposite. Creativity is 'determined' by the death-drive, where the death-drive is obsessive, compulsive, repetitive, undeviating, monomaniacal and so forth. Because of its own emphasis on repetitive, fixated love, my starting example is Ian McEwan's novel *Enduring Love*, and from that I go on to explore competing concepts of creativity, not just from clinical psychoanalysis (Hanna Segal and Christopher Bollas) but in the work of critics such as Nietzsche and Leo Bersani. I try to show that, throughout these interventions, 'creativity' never quite succeeds in slipping the shadow of death.

Among the key aspects of love fixation or love-sickness as exemplified in McEwan's novel is, inevitably, the transference onto the love object, and transference, as we know, is the supreme mode of the exchange between psychoanalyst and 'patient', each using the other as a screen on which to project positive or negative fantasies. It is a mode in which the line between subjective and objective becomes faint, where truth and interpretation can't be disentangled, where past and present merge. With the suspension of norms which this gives rise to, transference is nothing if not a breeding-ground for suggestion and suggestibility – the very conditions of rhetoric. Picking up on the earlier chapter on Heidegger, I now look more squarely at the place of rhetoric and belief in the composition of death. Enter Macbeth, that character for whom the 'suggestion' by the witches of accession to the throne is powerful enough to 'shake' his 'single state of man' and bring forward his own end. I apply the notion of suggestion to ideology, which works very much like suggestion, by 'suggesting' ideas and actions to vulnerable subjects who may be induced to give up their lives to serve a dominant set of values. Death inhabits the heart of suggestion, as an ever-present possibility, or, in slightly more political terms, ideology carries with it the threat of death, offered as the chance for self-sacrifice. In both cases, death is the *telos* of seduction; there is a death-drive of rhetoric, of the art of persuasion, of the formation of words, of the fabrication of images and, in the case of Macbeth, of the conjuring of fantasies – fair and foul, crown and dagger – that hang in the air.

If the preceding chapters relate the death-drive to art *works*, the final

one looks at how artworks relate to their own entropy and survival as art *objects*. How are we to understand the fact that they live on after the demise and/or decease of their creators? Are artworks living or dead objects or neither? Does their preservation bear comparison with the minimal metabolic state that Freud envisions in the death-drive? I begin by reprising the Shakespearean theme from the previous chapter to discuss how plays such as *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* have survived over time. But to try and get at the real quality of stillness, of minimal change, I shift to Samuel Beckett – not just his writings (particularly the text *Stirrings Still*), but also to the famous photographs of Beckett taken by John Minihan. Through an analysis of a picture of Beckett taken in Paris, I explain the notion of deathly stillness and its relation to the artwork, likening it to radioactivity and the preservation of light.

The postscript, finally, offers a somewhat less analytic, more meditative, reflection on many of the themes developed in the chapters before it, beginning with an encounter with a sculpture by Katharina Fritsch.

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# Introduction

Everything that lives, dies. Equally – for it doesn't follow – everything that dies will have lived. Rather than being opposites, therefore, it's fairer to say that living and dying depend on each other, each the other's condition. Although we might think of death as standing at the end of life, as its destination or terminus, it had to be there from the start – life wouldn't have been able to get going unless it had agreed to come to an end. Life and death make up the two sides of a same coin – not two different coins – and, whichever is face up, they belong together.

So why, if everything that lives, dies, might death want a 'drive'? If life will die anyway, why this supererogatory drive towards death? Even if it never steps on the gas at all, life will crash, and crash fatally; in fact, if it presses the brakes all the way, the same result ensues. For the living, death can't be avoided, so why append to it this apparently gratuitous force? Which isn't to assume we have any proof of a death drive, like we have proof of death. It's just a theory, a hypothesis or a speculation, and Sigmund Freud himself, with whom 'the death drive' is most closely associated and around whom this book is based, sought, even as he proposed it, to distance himself somewhat. Of the death drive, nothing empirically reliable may be said, and in this sense it can be waved away as superstition.

Even before beginning, then, there are two counts on which we might, when asked to take the death-drive seriously, demur: just because people have written about it, it doesn't mean it exists; and in any case, life and death seem perfectly capable of getting along without it. So what makes it worthy of attention?

The most obvious answer must be suicide. If we wish to talk credibly about a drive towards death, it seems sensible to begin with those people who have killed themselves. They were once alive, meaning they were due to die anyway, but the certainty of death wasn't strong enough for them not to bring it forward. While most people never know in

advance the exact date when they will die, the suicide, by shortening its horizon, gives the time of death the knowability it lacked – and it's in this bringing-forward that a death drive might lie. It might be, in other words, that suicides are possessed of – possessed by – that which has led them to introduce, or accept, an extra force which death, in order to eventuate, didn't strictly need – namely, a death drive. The suicide will have accelerated towards a death that would have happened regardless, and for that wilful acceleration, we might reasonably point to a 'drive'; we might even be able to prove it.

Case closed? Not quite. As we'll see in the next chapter, the relationship implied between death and time, for example, is one that Heidegger would have frowned on. The idea that the suicide speeds death up rests on the false assumption that death waits like an appointment at the end of your life – false because death is essentially accidental. Yes, inevitably, and yes, implacably, death will befall you, and about whether it will befall you there's no arguing; but when it strikes is another matter: it can happen any time. There's nothing about death to make it stick to that appointment, and it too, like the suicide, can bring on its occurrence with horrifying dispatch. But unlike the suicide, who takes the time of death under his or her own control, so reducing its unpredictability, death refuses to be slated on a calendar – and the fact is that even the would-be suicide can die by accident before the scheduled self-destruction. The suicide's drive towards death can always be pre-empted by, as it were, the real thing, which doesn't mean the suicide doesn't have such a drive, but that it's less a drive than an intention. Nor does that deplete its gravity, but it does situate suicide as an act involving consciousness and choice, for which the notion of a drive – and we've yet to define it – might be excessive.

What's more, that act might not even be one of self-destruction. For Freud, suicide is technically impossible because, if the psyche is driven by anything, it's the fulfilling of its wishes, and it ought never to wish for its own end. On the contrary, this central wishing-function – what Freud called *Das Ich*, and which has always, if unhelpfully, been translated into English as 'the ego' – wants to preserve itself, even to the point of self-replication, and having defined the ego as this intent for its own best interests, Freud cannot permit it to do away with itself. So what's the explanation? Freud says suicide constitutes a form of sadism that has been trained mistakenly on the self by the self. 'Normal' sadism is externally directed aggression, but in the case of suicide, it backfires, and it backfires because the suicidal individual sees in the mirror someone they hate. This someone is a forgery, but the suicide takes it for a self-portrait and lashes out. Typically, he or she will have internalised a picture of

themselves that someone else has of them – a damning, spiteful picture that portrays the individual as worthless. Undeniably, a fatal aggression then materialises which puts its bearer to death, and even for psychoanalysis, which you might expect to treat suicide more inclusively, self-murder is a genuine aberration: but the drive, if there was one, began in the again more ‘normal’ territory of causing harm to others, that is not in damaging oneself.

And yet, as above, sadism might be explained without recourse to what, in the term ‘death drive’, sounds like a grand, even a romantic, metaphysics. Sadism may lead to the death of others or the self, but, once more, its atmosphere would generally be one of consciousness and intention, or at least of will – the fact that sadistic energy may be directed at all implies an agency, whereas a drive suggests something not wholly governable by action or decision. What about the flipside of sadism – masochism? Is it there that we find the death drive? Up to a point.<sup>1</sup> Freud bills masochism as an ‘economic problem’, or in other words a matter of degree. Once an individual begins to self-harm, the balance of sadism (aggression) and masochism (pleasure) can be very hard to call. But that pleasure might be derived at all from ostensibly detrimental behaviour gives a first clue to the death drive, and in his great work ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ Freud elaborates. His premise, as ever, will be that the ego seeks the fulfilment of its wishes, and by this stage of his career (1920) that premise has become a principle. Now, ‘principle’ is itself a metaphysical as well as a juridical term, indicating a stature of precedence and authority, so to avert to a ‘beyond’ of a principle, is to put that principle’s pre-eminence into doubt. And as if breaking his own law, Freud treads very carefully, for what lies beyond the pleasure principle is a phenomenon, or at least a hypothesis, that both secures and unfastens the concept of pleasure on which Freud has built the institution of psychoanalysis. His argument goes broadly as follows.

### Beyond the pleasure principle

Pleasure consists in the fulfilling of wishes, and once a wish is fulfilled, it – if only temporarily – goes away. Of course, the process won’t always happen so smoothly, and – thanks to the pleasure principle’s great rival, reality – the path to pleasure will all too often have been strewn with impediments. If you can’t always get what you want, it’s because real life, in the form of competing interests, gets in the way, which forces you to go around the houses and defer your gratification. But once you reach your goal and satisfy your wish, the wish gives over, and it’s as

this abatement that pleasure may be defined. Rather than excitation, the pleasure in pleasure comes from relief, from the extirpation of things that agitate; satisfaction or consummation is achieved and the fires of wanting quenched – the ‘fires of wanting’ being a reference to the Buddhist concept of ‘nirvana’, to which Freud himself alludes, and which literally means an extinguishing of the flames. In this sense, pleasure may be redescribed negatively as the ‘absence of unpleasure’ – it’s only upon the silencing of the wish’s beseeching, petitioning voice that the pleasure may be heard.

So far so good, maybe, but having made this relatively innocuous negative definition of pleasure, Freud proceeds to the implication that, in pursuing such abatement – in seeking stillness in seeking pleasure – we are craving something that begins to look like nothing less than death. It’s the inertia that comes with the wish’s fulfilment that we covet, the emptying out of energies that brings a serene calm, and once we start hunting for this easeful state of Lethe, what’s to say it differs from a solicitation of death? Why not claim the motive for pleasure is a motive for cessation, a suicide that can’t be written off as misdirected sadism? Let’s call a spade a spade.

On its own, however, that might sound less like the naming of a truth than a mere manipulation of metaphors, that is the end of pleasure is a repose, death is also a repose, and so there’s a metaphorical affinity between them – we’re not actually talking about death, just something that resembles it. But his argument won’t be so easily dismissed, and Freud has two further planks in support, the first of which marks the real innovation – for some, the scandal<sup>2</sup> – of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ and which helps sketch out the definition of a ‘drive’. Although exhibited in the individual psyche – or, if not ‘exhibited’, at least hinted at in the patterns of behaviour across a wide sample of individuals, patterns from which theoretical inferences may be drawn – this yearning for a return to simplicity belongs to the human species as a species. Freud notes the inanimate world preceded that of the animate – there were oceans before there were fish, mountains before birds and so on – and does so as part of his case-building: the death drive – that desire to return to a state of inertia, that wish on the part of the organic to become inorganic – tunes in to the evolution of that species and aspires to reverse it. In the micro pursuit of pleasure, a macro force, a cosmology, casts its shadow, and every time we want something, we are, to some minimal – or perhaps maximal – extent, driving at a zero-state that is the best recapitulation we can manage of the lost era that preceded us, an era in which we had yet to exist. By nature phylogenetic, the death drive therefore works its species-interests through the individual psyche, and that is how the notion

of a ‘drive’ begins to earn its appropriateness: it won’t be controlled by the individual that might be its vehicle – the drive is the driver.

Sometimes Freud’s German term, *Todestrieb*, gets translated into English not as ‘death drive’ but ‘death instincts’, and both are helpful in getting at the primal energy – the energy that vanquishes energy – which Freud describes. ‘Drive’ not just translates but transliterates ‘Trieb’, for it’s common for the ‘d’ and ‘v’ in English to stand in for the ‘t’ and ‘b’ in German, respectively; it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that ‘drive’ and ‘Trieb’ are the same word – even if they have gone on to accrue different connotations in their national contexts. The same applies to ‘Tod’, where again the ‘t’ becomes a ‘d’ in English, and where the German letter ‘d’ often gets changed into the English ‘th’. Lexically speaking, the phrase ‘death drive’ is as close to the compound ‘Todestrieb’ as the English translator can get – which is why, from now on, I will hyphenate it as ‘death-drive’; I also feel the hyphen works, like the German compound, to affiliate ‘death’ with ‘drive’ as if they were twins who share a provenance not only lexical, but semantic – that, to an extent, death is a driving, and a drive is deathly. So what of ‘drive’ and ‘instincts’? ‘Drive’ carries with it a sense of purpose, motion and direction – something singular and intent, not easily diverted; force pulses within it, and it’s in its forcefulness that the question we opened with, of the death-drive’s gratuitousness, arises – why, if its outcome was assured, does death need to complement itself with a drive? On the other hand, ‘instincts’, with its Latin rather than Teutonic base, has a character that’s less immediately teleological – an ‘instinct’ needn’t be trained on a target. But, like the ‘drive’, the ‘instincts’, which are plural, operate at a level different from consciousness, and that plurality serves to make them only the more elusive. Perhaps, where ‘drive’ is abstract or unallocated, ‘instincts’ derives from a more organic register, as if proper to the class of the animate, as if natural; a ‘drive’, conceivably, could be unnatural, technological or perverse – even diabolical. Finally, a subtle gender difference divides them – ‘drive’ the term more usually associated with the masculine, ‘instincts’ with the feminine. If I choose to use the term ‘death-drive’, it’s in the hope that all of these nuances, those of the drive and those of the instincts, might remain gathered into it.

And of this death-drive Freud is saying that it lies, or might lie, beyond the pleasure principle. Although we are universally motivated by the fulfilling of wishes, the fulfilment brings a peaceful satisfaction implying that what we were wishing for, all along, was death. In talking here about ‘Freud’, however, it’s important to note that his ideas were constantly developing, and any text of his gives more a snapshot in time of those ideas than a consistent position or exposition. At times, death

in Freud appears like pleasure's hidden agenda; at other times, like pleasure's opposite, and in his late writings, Freud elevates death and pleasure into mythic forces, *Eros* and *Thanatos*, as if Greek gods – in which guise sometimes they oppose each other, sometimes become the two facets of the same entity and sometimes are both the same and different. Beneath all permutations, what's important about 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' is that, as its title suggests, pleasure may not be the be-all and end-all, may not after all stand as the 'principle' from which everything else follows, and that, in death, pleasure meets its match; where there was one principle, now there are two, even if occasionally they will 'appear' as the same or merge. It would be crude to say that Freud makes a turn, an epistemic re-route, from a monadic to a dyadic system; less crude to say that in death pleasure finds its dominion circumscribed, or encounters a limit – even if that limit marks out, for pleasure, nothing more than the difference between itself and itself.

But of course, pleasure already had, in the 'reality principle' mentioned above, a worthy competitor – where pleasure went, there went reality, always ready to tackle it and bring it down to earth. So in circumscribing pleasure, does death supplant reality? Well, if death is sometimes the 'same' as pleasure, it would offer opposition to pleasure more wily than reality – where reality operates as a local, if necessary, interruption to pleasure's goals. Reality furnishes pleasure with obstacles to negotiate, which means they can be identified as such, but death never quite becomes an object for pleasure to apprise, never quite posits itself in the way that reality, being real, must. In other words, reality might remain a principle of pleasure's frustration – an in-principle delay on satisfaction – but, compared with the death-drive, it can always be got around. What reality stipulates is merely the deferral of pleasure – a deferral that 'merely', by requiring people to adjust to others, produces civilisation and society – but not its extinction.

And what about 'life'? Reality will continue to pluck at pleasure's sleeve, just as ambiguities in the relationship between pleasure and death will refuse to go away, but why would Freud insist it's between death and *pleasure*, *Thanatos* and *Eros*, that the highest-level psychomachia takes place? Why not, if death is the true end-all, pit it against the true be-all, that is, life itself? Why bother with pleasure, which, compared with life, seems secondary? At best, the question opens another box of ambiguities; at worst, it bears out the populist view that psychoanalysis reduces everything to sex. Let's address it. For if death is sometimes the same as pleasure, so too is life. As his thinking renews itself, Freud increasingly portrays pleasure as a life energy, a reaching-out in order to connect and bond with others, which is life's condition for generating

more life. Its ulterior motive might be its own death, but its first ‘instinct’ will be a solicitation of others, a binding of its otherwise unbound energy with another being. Which also echoes evolution – the shift of the early organism from unicellular to multicellular status, the imperative of life – its ‘principle’, no doubt – being to grow. Pleasure, lately crowned as Eros, is at the very least the servant of life, the modus by which individuals seek out other individuals in order to add to themselves, to achieve complexity and increase the chances of their own furtherance; and at the most, pleasure is life itself, for what is life if not exactly that polyphiloprogenitive urge?

Life, death, pleasure, reality: while life can more or less be mapped onto pleasure, death can’t be mapped onto reality, but might, if it coincides with pleasure, be mapped onto life. In other words, life, death and pleasure pretty much overlap. So has Freud not just constructed a vast tautology? What lies beyond the pleasure principle is the death-drive, but both are a cultivation of the inertia that life, as the vehicle of pleasure, also pursues. True, en route to this unmissable destination of nothingness (or rather near-nothingness – see below), two critical things will have taken place – reality and reproduction, no less – but such sublunary phenomena are sideshows compared to the main event being fought out by the gods of sex and death. And yet, if the terms can be made so easily to collapse into one another, it doesn’t have to signal a failure of logic. Or rather, it does – but for good reason. One could ask whether, like Jung, Freud has not, in place of a philosophy or a metaphysics or a theory – what you might, in any case, call a logos – created a mythos. Although the logical distinctions between life, death and pleasure tend to break down, they find themselves superseded, or outvoiced, by a drama, by a battle of the immortals, in which forces – as in the ‘economic problem’ of masochism cited above – vie with one another. It’s a drama in which Freud tends to put life and pleasure on one side, and death on the other, as if these had been underwritten by Sophoclean antagonism, but either side could always, as in the Hegelian dialectic, see itself in its opponent. Logically, little difference between Eros and Thanatos obtains, either one mutating into the stronger or weaker inflection of the same immaterial material, but mythographically, or dramatically, they occupy separate poles between which a compelling tension plays out, and, as scholars of psychoanalysis like to stress, it’s in this ‘dynamic’, rather than the ‘topographic’, relationship between the terms that their value comes to lie: if, analytically, life, death and pleasure can be construed as a worthless tautology, dramatically each term takes on counterfactual weight in relation to the other. Therefore the psyche becomes the arena more of drama than reason, and the great bind of psychoanalysis is that

it must apply a rational, preferably a scientific, method to an object – the psyche – that it will have established as something other than rational, as a private theatre of drama or myth. It's as if, while his thinking unfolds, Freud wants to say it's all the same – the scientific distinctions create a ladder that in the end the scientist must throw away. Or, to use those technical terms, reason, with its distinctions and disaggregations, would be a 'defence' against this intolerable sameness-in-difference of the various primary forces.

Not everything can be bound into such a schema, however, be it collapsed logic or expanded myth: what escapes both is destruction. As we were saying a moment ago, suicide – which also, paradoxically, falls outside the bailiwick of the death-drive – avails itself of sadism, and sadism, in that tireless and sometimes confusing revision by Freud of his ideas over time, starts to associate itself with the 'instincts of aggression' where these, again, are themselves both the same and different from the death-drive. Like sadism, the instincts of aggression typically orient themselves externally – they are the feelings, perhaps, of hatred or destruction that we channel towards others; they might even lead to death. But what's curious about the death-drive is that, for its own purposes, it can largely do without this reservoir of aggression: if the death-drive is self-destructive (destroying *the* self, that is, rather than *itself*), the capacity for destruction at its disposal produces something other than nothing. Freud talks about the death-drive's 'conservative' qualities, and the end-state postulated is of a return not to nothingness, but to a minimum, to a simplicity, to the inorganic stasis that subsisted before the unwelcome molestation, the intrusive quickening, of life: as Frank Sulloway puts it, 'Life must have first arisen [...] when inanimate matter became cathected by some external force, and an instinct simultaneously came into being which sought to cancel out the tension that had just been acquired.'<sup>3</sup> In this light, life can be read as an aberration, a chance convulsion that, relative to the other planets, makes Earth the exception, the only place in the universe where this unique and unplanned disturbance of inanimate continuity occurred. Yes, from Freud's speculations about a beyond of the pleasure-principle residing in the death-drive, one could infer that his was a psychologicistic version of the nihilism so bruted in the first part of the twentieth century, but no – the death-drive stops short of annihilation. While it might acquiesce in the removal of presence by death, it restores an earlier state, and might be better understood as retraction or retrenchment, an ultimate status quo ante. Not that therefore it should be understood as innocuous or benign: if the 'death' aimed at by the death-drive replaces the organic with the inorganic, and this speaks to a *de minimis* prevailing as

opposed to nothingness, it doesn't mean the death-drive wasn't, as the word suggests, a drive, a force that summoned itself in order to counter something – call it life – that might have continued on terms of its own and towards an ordinary death, one that hadn't been put in reverse, sent back to an archaic origin. It drove against something, this death-drive, and so a certain resistance or friction had to be involved, and with it a hostility not so cleanly decoupled from destruction.

It's in this version of destruction, perhaps, that the driveness of the drive, and its presenting superfluousness, consists. On the one hand, there's the naked destructiveness that leaves behind it nothing, the instincts of aggression run amok, and of this first kind of destructiveness, the death-drive partakes a little – but only a little. After all, death itself would have taken care of the end of life. On the other hand, the death-drive embraces, sources itself from, a so-called destructiveness whose mission – it's an almost aesthetic imperative – seeks to preserve a pure irreducibility, a minimum, a prior state and a priority that rests on the near side of nothingness; and not least because, in this, the death-drive will have preserved, retained or conserved *n*, this latter nothing is something. It might have chosen, given it's the death-drive, to leave nothing behind, but the death-drive opts for withholding: it withholds from destruction the last vestige of 'being' – inorganic being, to be sure – that it otherwise might have smashed into extinction. But in getting to this zero point of care, of archival tenderness even, it had to clear a path, to scythe away what was in the tendency of life merely to die; to get to the last refuge of conservation, it had to add death to death, to bend the terminus back to an origin, and it's in this supplementary gesture that its 'essence', or at least its function, resides. Although apparently gratuitous, the death-drive thereby plays a role left vacant by death: where death destroys, the drive preserves. True, what it seeks to preserve is a leastness, a near-nothing, but that nevertheless has a value. Left to itself, death would destroy everything. What the death-drive does is to preserve, in the midst of death, a leastness, a less than being that is more than nothing.

Of course it never succeeds, because death leaves it with nothing, but the death-drive, as a drive, will have set its sights on this withheld, anterior trace of an earlier life that had yet to come alive. A drive it may be, but compared with death, the death-drive is weaker, because it has only phylogenetic nostalgia to field against the constantly renewing resources of death which unrelentingly put lives to an end, and with an irreversibility that is definitive. In this sense, when we die we continue to die over time, the death-drive never having been able to turn the clock back, to return our dead selves to the past. It is, after all, only a drive.

## The literature

Only a drive it may be, but the death-drive has stimulated intense reaction and, without hoping to provide a full literature review, I would like, for the sake of adding context, to pick out very briefly some of the more striking works in the post-Freudian canon on death – those, at least, that do not simply repudiate Freud's hypothesis.

I'll start with Melanie Klein, whose published work remains throughout much more closely tacked to the clinical experience of psychoanalysis than Freud's often more expansive texts. And it's just the destructiveness in the death-drive that we were discussing a moment ago that perhaps most interests Klein: she certainly has little to say about Freud's more exotic theories of phylogenesis. Take 'Peter', the little boy whose analysis she relates in 'The Psycho-Analytic Play Technique'.<sup>4</sup> Peter has a toy man whom he throws from a brick that's a stand-in for a bed, and Klein interprets this as Peter's death-wish towards his father. Why would the little boy wish his father dead? Because he had seen his father having sex with his mother in the bed being represented, and it provoked a jealousy in him that Peter could assuage only by staging his father's death. At another level, the toy represents Peter himself whom Peter wishes to punish for having the sexual feelings towards his mother that made him jealous. It's a story that says a lot about Kleinian theory – its adaptation of the Oedipus complex, its emphasis on objects and their symbolic value – but it also says that Klein's thoughts on death can be subsumed under the psychological category of aggression. The 'death' of the father has little to do, at least at first sight, with the Freudian return to the state of inertia, and much more resembles the primary sadism that, as we've seen, Freud distinguishes from the death-drive. Having said that, it's a sadism on the boy's part that brings some relief, plausibly causing a 'reduction in unpleasure'. In other words, sadism can be a source of great pleasure, and might therefore offer itself to the death-drive as an instrument.

But of course, the death-drive, insofar as it is a drive, and certainly insofar as it is a principle, puts itself beyond treatment – Jean Laplanche goes so far as to say it is 'radically excluded from the field of the unconscious',<sup>5</sup> and for Freud, it joins pleasure in the very structuring of the psyche, meaning that it can't in itself become an object for psychoanalysis. Whereas Klein was indeed primarily a clinician, harvesting psychoanalysis for the empirical dimension, and the story of Peter belongs with a larger clinical endeavour that lay in helping patients commute aggressive tendencies into more accepting ones, and that meant construing the death-drive as death instincts that might be first

observed and then converted into life instincts. In therapeutic terms, this represented a shift from the ‘paranoid’ to the ‘depressive’ state: a patient trapped in the paranoid state knows only polarised views – bad father, good mother, for example, as in the Peter story; the ‘depressive’ patient, by contrast, has learned to deal with ambiguity – both father and mother are both good and bad. Sound mental health lies in tolerating imperfection, and where there’s an obsession with death – with destruction, aggression or sadism – the problem is less its morbid character than its representing the world as a series of stark choices which throws the chooser into crisis. It’s not that Klein downplays the significance of death – on the contrary, it forms a key axis along which behaviour moves – but that the death she refers to probably takes little from the metapsychological, even metaphysical, profile of the Freudian death-drive. Implicitly she’s suspicious of any benefit it might afford, except insofar as the death instincts – or, rather, the instincts for aggression – can be conquered and civilised. If nothing else, the death instincts for Klein provide an energy that, through treatment, can be moderated in the direction of more ‘depressive’ – better socially adjusted – behaviour.

What Klein also stresses less in the game that Peter plays is the function of repetition – children’s games being highly ritualistic – and yet, in the development of the theory of psychoanalysis, it was to the problem of repetition that the death-drive arrived as a solution. As well as noting that the goal of pleasure looked indistinguishable from death, Freud was puzzled by the question as to why, if the psyche is governed by pleasure, it will repeat things that appear to cause it harm? As Richard Boothby puts it in his study of Lacan (whom we’ll come to in a moment), ‘The repetitive, even compulsively repetitive character of these phenomena [traumatic dreams, restaging loss, masochism] led Freud to suspect the operation of a fundamental instinctual force.’<sup>6</sup> The solution to the repetition paradox was that in the repetition of trauma, the trauma counts less than the repetition; and repetition brings consolation, whatever content it repeats, because it keeps things the same, admitting none of the variation that causes the psyche to flinch. It’s on these grounds that repetition is deathly: it practises a studied exclusion of difference, of any disturbance of the wavelengths that track across the mind. Better, therefore, to repeat a trauma than undergo a new experience, even if that new experience proffers pleasure.

There’s another, more famous, children’s game supposedly involving death and repetition, which comes from ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ itself, and which has set off a whole sub-canon of writing by Donald Winnicott, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, to name only a few. It features another little boy – Freud’s own grandson, no less – rolling away

a kind of bobbin and reeling it back again, shouting ‘Fort!’ when it goes and ‘Da!’ when it comes back. In his interpretation of the game, Freud himself doesn’t mention death, but he does talk about the boy deriving pleasure from what, at first sight, looks like an unpleasurable symbolic act, that is using the spool to represent the mother’s departure.<sup>7</sup> But, of course, the sending-away is a necessary precursor to its return, and it’s the return, along with the fact that the little boy actively controls the movements, that results in pleasure. Jacqueline Rose says that ‘[t]he death drive is identified by Freud in that moment when the child seeks to master absence by staging the recall of the lost object,’<sup>8</sup> which is a little hasty as a reading, but the main point is there: by dramatising his mother’s absence, the little boy, as if overstepping his own littleness, controls its unpleasant effects on him, converting them into pleasure; at the same time, the repeating of the game not only repeats that pleasure but also serves to ward off any new scenario with his mother that might trigger a fresh, unforeseen instance of pain. Implicitly, the death-drive is at work.

It’s only later on, after the discussion of the game, that Freud makes the link between repetition and death explicit – repetition serving to keep psychic disturbance to a moribund minimum. However, the boy’s game prepares the ground, which means that, apart from anything else, Freud is using his discussion of it as a rhetorical move designed to soften the reader up, so to speak, and it’s the text’s rhetorical strategy, as much as its content, that interests Derrida.<sup>9</sup> In the to-and-fro of the boy’s wooden spool, Derrida sees a correlative (or something closer) to Freud’s own havering in the argument – a havering between proposing and disavowing the theory of the death-drive – and, with it, the more general question of taking up a position on a subject, of stating a thesis or adopting a position. Derrida’s project is to ‘relier’, to tie back, ‘the question of *life death* to the question of the position’.<sup>10</sup> In particular, he alights on the trope – for want of a better word – of speculation, the hypothetical character of Freud’s thinking in the text. What is the link with death? A Kleinian interpretation of the game might say the boy is staging the death of his mother, by throwing her away, thus punishing her for ever having left him. But from a Derridean view, that would be simplistic. The sending-away, for Derrida, is not in itself a death, but merely an absence or even a ‘distant presence’. To that extent, the risk the boy takes in despatching the spool is limited – he’s not really letting her go, and after all, there’s string attached – and so the ‘speculation’ he makes as to her return is fairly circumscribed and safe. The same goes for Freud’s argument: he’s playing at a radical theory of the death-drive, but is all the while keeping it tied to the string of psychoanalysis, thus manipulating the positions like a puppeteer – just as by positing a

'beyond' of the pleasure principle Freud is actually keeping it in sight. In a move analogous to his critique of the history of madness as narrated by Foucault, whereby madness must by definition escape any history of it, Derrida suggests that the death-drive cannot, in principle, submit to becoming an object for psychoanalysis – it always removes itself from any place or position in which it might be stationed. Instead, Derrida, who insists on a distinction between absence and death, suggests that any death-drive worth its name must involve the possibility of never coming back, of absolute loss, of losing its position, including Freud letting go of his argument and, indeed, letting go of the whole edifice of psychoanalysis over which – not least by using his own grandson as a purportedly objective test case – he continues to preside.

In this reading, the death-drive does not belong psychologically to this or that individual, as in Klein, nor might it be calibrated with a phylogenetic urge on the part of the human species to return to a state of inanimate inertia, as in Freud. Rather, it becomes the condition of all sending-away and return, not just of toys, but of everything with communicative potential, with the power of signification, that we might put out into the world. If the boy's game represents anything, it's the fact that reason or logic is constantly pulled between two forces – one that allows it to be out there, to be read, understood, passed on and interpreted, and another, anterior to it, which allowed it to come into being in the first place, that paradoxically marks its absolute disappearance. The 'death-drive' in Derrida becomes, among other things, that which both enables and cancels out every game that can be played, and every positive statement that can be made; the position is posited as positive – or even a super-positive such as a 'beyond' – only insofar as its positionality will have been undermined. Hence what Derrida calls an aporia between the thesis of the death-drive, that is its intelligibility as a concept or construct, and its force as a-thetic disappearance.

In the same book where his essay on Freud appears, Derrida takes Lacan to task for a similar misprision, isolating in Lacan a redemptive urge that prevents him from understanding death as absolute loss, as the possibility of zero return on any speculative investment.<sup>11</sup> There is the implication again that death has been conveniently elided with (a positive) absence, and it's true that in his earlier works Lacan appears to think of the death-drive in a psychologistic fashion not wholly dissimilar to Klein whom he occasionally cites: 'death' gets associated with the child's loss of intimacy with the mother's body, and the death-drive signals a nostalgic desire to return to it. Similarly, when Lacan writes about the instincts of aggression, 'death' often connotes the fragmentation of the self that aggression can lead to for both perpetrator and

victim, a fragmentation that prompts the compensatory reaction to reintegrate the parts. In the words of Richard Boothby again: 'For Lacan, the traumatic force of the death drive aims not at the biological organism but at the unity of the ego.'<sup>12</sup>

But Lacan's work is not simply derivative and if, famously, he says in the *Écrits* that 'to ignore the death instincts in Freud's doctrine is to misunderstand that doctrine entirely,'<sup>13</sup> it's not solely in the spirit of disciple and protector that he's writing. In his own analysis of the 'Fort-Da' game, Lacan introduces a new term, 'desire', whose relationship to the death-drive is one whereby it both incorporates and supersedes the death-drive's elements. He says that:

The subject is not simply mastering his privation by assuming it, but . . . is raising his desire to a second power. For his action destroys the object that it causes to appear and disappear in the anticipating provocation of its absence and its presence. His action thus negatives the field of forces of desire in order to become its own object to itself. And this object, being immediately embodied in the symbolic dyad of two elementary exclamations, announces in the subject the diachronic integration of the dichotomy of the phonemes, whose synchronic structure existing language offers to his assimilation; moreover, the child begins to become engaged in the system of the concrete discourse of the environment, by reproducing more or less approximately in his Fort! and in his Da! the vocables that he receives from it.<sup>14</sup>

It's hardly a clear account, but Lacan seems to be saying that any deathlessness in the game can be read as a negative phase en route to a conclusion, somewhat as in Hegelian dialectics, and the desire to do away with the toy, to destroy it, leads on to a place where the whole scene takes on new meaning for the boy. The desire, which was once caught up in deathly and aggressive feelings, opens out into language which has the ability to bring words together – in this case the two exclamations, 'Fort!' and 'Da!' – in time, thus realising a reintegration at a higher level of desire, the reintegration formerly threatened by the deathly or aggressive instincts. Which is to say the words spoken are as important as the toy, for its these that have the power to stage a symbolic cohesion that the game alone falls short of. This linguistic gain doesn't quite restore the loss that occurred in 'reality' before the game was played, and desire doesn't quite substitute for a sense of identity, but nevertheless it will have overcome more deathly and fissiparous possibilities. And so if, for Freud, the pleasure that steers the death-drive results in, as it were, a downward gesture, one of return to the ultra-simple, then in Lacan, almost the reverse applies: 'pleasure' gets substituted by 'desire', and desire, even if first it has to pass through destruction, will work upwards, so to speak, towards integration and complexity, and for a relationship

to the world that, far from being reticent and inward, is linguistic, that is a mode of attachment and social connection.

Just as well: if the death-drive were not sublated or sublimated in the manner described by Lacan, then social connection would come under severe pressure. Freud was clearly aware of this, and in both *Why War?* and *Civilisation and Its Discontents*, he effectively launched a new discipline of psychoanalytic sociology that would hold the death-drive near its centre, but as the force necessary for civilisation to resist. He writes, for example, that:

Man's natural aggressive instinct, the hostility of each against all and of all against each, opposes this programme of civilisation. This aggressive instinct is the derivative and the main representative of the death instinct which we have found alongside of Eros and which shares world-dominion with it. And now, I think, the meaning of the evolution of civilisation is no longer obscure to us. It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species.<sup>15</sup>

As well as the helpful clarification that the aggressive instinct is, rather than a synonym for it, a derivative of the death instinct, Freud makes it clear that civilisation itself acquires meaning only with reference to those aggressive instincts that would seek to destroy it. Indeed, civilisation is the outcome of the struggle between life and death, and, for the generation writing after Second World War, Freud's work provided valuable tools for processing the events of world history. In short, wartime had testified to a global upsurge in the death instincts, a violation done unto civilisation, which it was the mission of postwar civilisation to salve and reverse. Far from residing as a mere speculative hypothesis at the outer limits of metapsychology, the death-drive had been mobilised like an armoured tank that came to sit menacingly at the centre of European history.

For a critic such as Norman O. Brown the implication is that such history is generated by the very conflict between the life and death instincts. The tragedy is that the root cause lies not in abstract historical forces, as in Hegel, say, but in the human being's aggressive instinct and the 'extroversion' of it that would otherwise be turned inward – the implication being that civilisation cannot come about without destruction, or, putting it in sensationalist terms, there's no art without war, and without war there'd be more suicide. In his 1959 publication, *Life Against Death*, Brown argues that:

According to Freud, aggressiveness represents a fusion of the life instinct with the death instinct, a fusion which saves the organism from the innate self-destructive tendency of the death instinct by extroverting it, a desire to

kill replacing the desire to die. As against Freud, we suggest that this extroversion of the death instinct is the peculiar human solution to a peculiar human problem. It is the flight from death that leaves mankind with the problem of what to do with its own innate biological dying, what to do with its own repressed death. Animals let death be a part of life, and use the death instinct to die: man aggressively builds immortal cultures and makes history in order to fight death.<sup>16</sup>

As it happens, Brown's gloss points at an alternative answer to the question I began with, of the apparent superfluousness of the death-drive. Where animals 'use the death instinct to die', man has been endowed with a surplus of death, as it were, which won't be entirely used up by his mortality. The residue belongs to man as the force of destruction that, to all intents and purposes, merges with the force of creation. In this sense, human life sits on a knife-edge in which it is almost arbitrary whether peace or war eventuates. Clearly, peace and civilisation are preferable to death and destruction, but cannot be guaranteed.

Not, at least, without repression: destruction needs converting into creation, death into life, or else it simply destroys, and that means repressing it. Certainly, Brown thinks of repression as the distinctive human attribute and the source of self-salvation. But there's an alternative view, developed by Herbert Marcuse, which eschews this need for repression, and not just on pragmatic grounds, but in principle. In his most famous work, *Eros and Civilisation*, Marcuse poses the following questions:

[I]s the conflict between pleasure principle and reality principle irreconcilable to such a degree that it necessitates the repressive transformation of man's instinctual structure? Or does it allow the concept of a non-repressive civilisation, based on a fundamentally different experience of being, a fundamentally different relation between man and nature, and fundamentally different existential relations?<sup>17</sup>

So there is a slippage from death to reality. Where Freud, as we have seen, comes in his later works to see death as its main rival, Marcuse reinstates the reality principle as the primary opponent to life, and he does so by positioning reality as the mechanism of repression. In other words, Marcuse recasts the reality principle so that it resembles the superego, that is the imperative placed on us by social life to find alternative, mediated outlets for the fulfilling of our wishes. One can take issue with this recasting – Laplanche and Pontalis, for example, say that the 'transition from the pleasure to the reality principle does not, however, involve the suppression of the pleasure principle'.<sup>18</sup> But that would be to miss the wider political point Marcuse wishes to make. For his thesis

is not just Freudian, but Marxist, and as his questions imply, the function of the reality principle might be more than ‘social’, if ‘social’ just means something normative: instead, it might be ideological. In this sense ‘eros’ becomes more than the individual’s reserve of libido, and rather the potential for collective dissidence, resistance to hegemony and even revolution; somewhat as in Adorno’s argument with Freud, ‘eros’ – or pleasure in Adorno – when understood properly, has the potential, therefore, not simply to generate civilisation, but generate alternative cultures in which repression, as the residue of political authoritarianism, would have very little part to play.<sup>19</sup>

As well as Adorno, one might, in this context, invoke Michel Foucault for whom pleasure and eros – relabelled as ‘sexuality’ – also harbour the power of critique, if not active insurrection. By the time we get to his later thinking, sexuality, particularly in its homoerotic form, is worn as an ‘aesthetic of the self’ that could plausibly be understood as deathly on the grounds of its extremism – literally a gay abandon to which life may be sacrificed. But even Foucault’s three-volume *History of Sexuality* has notably little to say on the connection between sexuality and the death-drive. Perhaps his most direct statement goes as follows:

The Faustian pact, whose temptation has been instilled in us by the deployment of sexuality, is now as follows: to exchange life in its entirety for sex itself, for the truth and the sovereignty of sex. Sex is worth dying for. It is in this (strictly historical) sense that sex is indeed imbued with the death instinct. When a long while ago the West discovered love, it bestowed on it a value high enough to make death acceptable; nowadays it is sex that claims this equivalence, the highest of all. And while the deployment of sexuality permits the techniques of power to invest life, the fictitious point of sex, itself marked by that deployment, exerts enough charm on everyone for them to accept hearing the grumble of death within it.<sup>20</sup>

Foucault claims to be relating a history in which sex has come to replace love as the most precious thing for which one might, like Faust, sell one’s soul. In this sense, sex and death are equivalents – better to have had sex and lost one’s life than never to have had sex at all – which makes the death instinct an instinct for ‘sex itself’. Except that there’s enough irony in the tone – and enough argument in the rest of his work – to infer that sex ‘itself’ may be an illusion and that the *Ding an Sich* of sex may itself be the object of ideological projection with a ‘repressive’ function of its own. Which in no way implies that death would be illusory too: the disturbing threat behind what Foucault writes is that sex leads to death *without* providing the gratification of ‘sex itself’.

That’s particularly unsettling given the hackneyed romantic associations between sex and death – the erotic charge of morbidity, the dark

embrace of the deathly stranger – especially as it hints at the possibility of the death-drive working, as it were, autonomously, without necessarily being indexed against sex, desire or pleasure.<sup>21</sup> But the idea of a death removed from sex or at least from sexual affect or ‘pleasure’ is a route few have pursued, although from Derrida’s work on cruelty, which I discuss in Chapter 4 titled ‘White Over Red’ – and where Derrida’s hypothesis, borrowed from Freud, that the death-drive ‘works in silence’, colours everything – one could derive a death-drive which, again, concerns an irrecuperable loss, one with very little of the narcissistic yield that often accompanies sexuality. Again one must distinguish this from nihilism, for its very withdrawal, its depriving presence of presence, is what permits all things to come to pass: all being is haunted. This is the death-drive as the haunting of life, or to use a Derridean neologism, a ‘hauntology’ to shake the ontology with which death, as in Heidegger, gets paired.

Hence Freudian ‘hauntings’ in literature and art. In a moment I’ll describe how I think the artwork, literary or pictorial or otherwise, avails itself of a death-drive, but it’s worth concluding this all-too-peremptory review by suggesting that the death-drive, rather than belonging to any overarching schema of western culture or psychoanalysis or philosophy, enjoys a strength that comes from its weakness – that fact that it’s barely there, that it never appears as such at all. For Derrida wants to say that the death-drive works in silence, and other thinkers, like Laplanche, like to talk about its ‘interior’ quality – the shocking idea revealed by Freud that the death-drive counts among our most inner, most archaic and necessary compulsions – and yet, to say it again, one ought not to take all this as an opportunity to bring out a nihilism. If the death-drive enjoys a presence-that-isn’t-one, if it fails to register phenomenologically, and if it doesn’t pretend itself as symptom – and all this in the face of the possibility that in warfare the death-drive exhibits itself on the most colossal scale – it’s not to argue that the death-drive is simply nothing, just as, on account of its conservative character, it doesn’t simply annihilate everything it takes into its purview. In the phrase of Simon Critchley, it’s ‘very little . . . almost nothing’.<sup>22</sup>

The closest one gets in Freud’s own texts to any ‘hauntology’ would be his work on the uncanny, developed more or less in tandem with ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ and subsequently analysed so expertly by Nicholas Royle.<sup>23</sup> Common to both Freud essays is the theme of repetition, but where in ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ the human compulsion to repeat signals a longing for deathly sameness, ‘The Uncanny’ describes the uncanny sensation provoked in humans by things that are repeated, especially where they become mechanical or robotic (think

of toys taking on a life of their own, not just being manipulated by children). Things come back, repeat or return in an unnatural way that runs against the spontaneity one associates with life, and Freud refers to Schelling's notion of the reappearance of what should have remained hidden.<sup>24</sup> In Freudian doctrine, the uncanny heralds the 'return of the repressed', which might be nothing less than the dead coming back to life. Freud even wonders if death is not a merely biological construct, and whether it might one day be overcome as a 'perhaps avoidable event in life'<sup>25</sup> – an interesting conjecture not least because it suggests again Freud's reluctance to accept that death might open out into absolutely nothing. Like the mind, from which, according to Freud, no experience ever gets erased – and so could always be reactivated – life can never be brought to an irreversible end. And its power of return, in whatever form, would be uncanny, not just because of its affective power, but because it would show how death has a certain life in it; one could even cite Freud's thoughts in his paper on transience, about the 'destruction' caused by winter before spring returns the beauty of nature to us . . .<sup>26</sup> In his theory of death, Freud doesn't go this far, but there might be a beyond of the beyond of the pleasure principle, defined as the deathly instinct to return to the inanimate state *in order to* come back again as living, where living and dying constitute not opposites but different degrees of energy. Put more simply, the death-drive is the instinct to come back to life, not to die, but to haunt. Which suggests that life itself, rather than being fully alive, is already a form of energetic haunting.

The death-drive could therefore be a differential energy, a haunting not-thereness within life, which, having returned, seeks only to go back once more to the state of nothingness. Life and death work together in this haunted, energetic loop in which each seeks to minimise the other, and, despite the rhetoric, there is no metaphysics outside of this play of the inorganic versus the organic. Which takes us back to the organic constraints on life, to biology, that element in Freud's thinking on death which has probably elicited the most scepticism (Lacan says dismissively of the death-drive and repetition that 'we all know very well that it's not a question of biology').<sup>27</sup> Frank Sulloway makes the plea that 'Freud's notion of a death instinct, by virtue of its consistently misunderstood status in psychoanalytic theory, exemplifies just how fully his intellectual union of psychology with biology has gone unappreciated in psychoanalysis'.<sup>28</sup> Which is not to reinstate a biological materialism against the metaphysical idealism, but it is to fight against the conceptual architecture of life and death that would separate them out too much, to taxonomise and tabulate them. Somewhat like a virus or a parasite, the

death-drive lives within the body of life, trying to create stillness within it, to put borders around it through which no disturbance can pass. And it's in this holding phenomenal and organic reality at bay, in this vain attempt to put secure boundaries around itself, in this essay at a stasis that will have passed through life and have experienced the colours and vicissitudes of animate living, that an aesthetics of the death-drive begins to emerge.

### **The death-drive and the aesthetic**

Without a death-drive, would we forget to die? No, that we die is simply the case, and the death-drive, as an instinct rather than a condition of possibility, shouldn't be confused with mortality; for all its force, a drive or instinct is always vulnerable to being stopped. From this angle, the death-drive becomes an albeit ineffective resistance to death, in the name of saving a certain quality or value of nothing that itself will have been spared from the disturbances and energies of organic life. It has a pathos to it. And if I used the word 'aesthetic' above, it's because it begins to get at this pseudo-nothingness, at this inanimate, left-alone sufficiency of life before life, and the longed-for sheltering of it by the death-drive. It's in its urge for keeping intact, and in an inanimate state, that which will have been exposed to the organic world, to life, that the death-drive might start to be considered an aesthetic drive. In the face of destruction, of inevitable transience and perdition – of death – the drive will have directed itself at retaining something not subject to entropy, at tarrying on the edge of creation. This 'instinct' to take life and freeze it, so to speak, in a more primary state, to keep it 'there', to effect some arrest, might be an aesthetic one, in the sense that any aesthetic 'drive' would wish to posit an inorganic entity – an artwork, not to beat about the bush – that, in the name of being created, takes on a different, a resistant relationship to death and the destructiveness by which it operates.

There's a second set of reasons for reframing the death-drive as aesthetic, and it's to do with the gratuitousness I have been insisting on. Although the drive is a drive, which might suggest it enjoys some necessity, it becomes a drive – that is, it avails itself of force or will – only because, had it remained inactive, nothing else would have adopted its mission. The default position for life is merely to die, and die into the future without any 'return' to an inorganic state – yes, in dying, the animate becomes inanimate, but it's only by way of metaphor that this process may be described as retrograde. The death-drive, in other words, was never a necessity, never a destiny – it was forced to

reinforce itself, and thereby became excessive: the death-drive exceeds death. However, there is in this some ambiguity – if Freud uses the term ‘drive’, it might well bear some affinity with the wish, with the urge towards an end-state that can’t be written off as supplementary. After all, psychoanalysis rests on the doctrine that the wish conditions all psychic activity; from a philosophical perspective, its refrain would be that wishing has a relationship to being in which, far from being inferior or auxiliary, it dominates. In psychoanalysis, pleasure is more important than being, more important than life itself – we’d rather die than experience unpleasure. Insofar as the drive of the death-drive corresponds to wishing, construing it as ‘unnecessary’ can’t therefore be entirely uncontentious – the death-drive could be understood as a species wish, as inalienable from the human race as the individual’s wish from the individual . . . So, on the one hand, the death-drive is ‘gratuitous’, but on the other hand, as a modality of wishing, of pleasure, of longing for the satisfaction of stasis, it is as essential to the species as wish-fulfilment to the individual. That makes the death-drive a form of unnecessary pleasure – a definition which again satisfies perhaps the demand for it to be considered aesthetic – except that pleasure, in this case, can’t be deemed a luxury, an aesthetic extra. In poststructuralist language, one might call these contradictory requirements an ‘aporia’, the marriage of irreconcilable conditions, or a ‘necessary impossibility’. The death-drive both is and isn’t necessary, which, given that, like the aesthetic, its interest lies in pleasure, redefines pleasure in turn as both dispensable and indispensable – and raises the question of whether aesthetic pleasure itself can always be dismissed as solely inessential.

In the name of pleasure, the death-drive tries to preserve, then, and in the midst of death, a trace of life both after it has died and before it has lived, and it is this pleasurable quasi-nothingness from which life, creation, will have been generated. Pleasure becomes the alpha and omega, a lying on either side of the animate, coming before or after the animate, which life separates out. To the extent that pleasure and the aesthetic may be associated – the aesthetic having long been understood as a chief form of pleasure, even if it’s not so explicit in Freud – that means the aesthetic might be counted among the ‘vast tautology’ mentioned before. If life pursues pleasure and pleasure pursues death, then the pleasurableness of death – which is, qua pleasure, aesthetic – means the aesthetic holds its place with Eros and Thanatos. Put more simply: artworks deliver pleasure, and pleasure is death, a transport towards the pleasurable or beautiful inanimate.

In sum, it’s for three reasons that we might want to say the death-drive has something of the aesthetic: it produces the inanimate; it is

gratuitous, albeit with a gratuitousness that is ‘necessary’; and it constitutes a form of pleasure. The death-drive and the aesthetic share an interest in reproducing, without being asked, something pleasurable and inanimate that, in retreating from life, bears its trace.

But is this not simply to say the relationship between the death-drive and the aesthetic is one of mere resemblance? And if the death-drive is aesthetic, does the reverse apply? Does it automatically mean that the aesthetic takes on the qualities of the death-drive? Typically, Freud himself interprets the artwork as he interprets the dream – as the condensed, displaced representation of its author’s wishes; and although those wishes must, as pleasure-seeking, enjoy a link with the death-drive, nowhere explicitly does Freud connect the two. Indeed, as his theories mature, he tends to see artworks as feats of civilisation, tokens of human triumph over barbarism, which arguably relocates them from id to superego – that is, they are the successful sublimations into civilised or cultural form of largely unwholesome, sexual longings. That makes repression – the shipping into the id of those longings – the spring of creativity, and even if the artworks thus created are, having been created, strictly speaking inanimate or ‘dead’ – even if they produce in their consumer an ‘absence of unpleasure’ – they are still to be treated as works of enlightenment and, one might say, enlivenment. Precious artifacts of civilised expression, artworks, if it’s not fatuous to say so, belong with life: an avid collector of cultural artifacts, Freud appeared, for example, to respect them for their unique documentary worth, their ability, in other words, to testify to noble efforts at acculturation. After all, artworks are not organic, and cannot be affected (they don’t feel anything) by the pathos of return to near-nothing which the death-drive drives through the human species. It would be a bizarre anthropomorphism indeed to claim that artworks want to die. So if there is a death-drive of the artwork, it needs careful defining.

Now, it’s entirely possible, on the Freudian view, that the pleasure afforded by an artwork might reward its consumer with a sense of calmness, a relief from excitation no different from that delivered by other pleasures. Both the death-drive and art provide means towards a pleasurable end, which would be that of inertia, the ‘absence of unpleasure’, if not quite of death. In this sense, one might ‘use’ art as a local form of the death-drive, a means of extracting pleasure that will lead to the stilling of agitation. And one could, conceivably, leave the argument there. It’s probably in the chapters ahead that deal most with rhetoric and imagination that the point is the more rigorously made, but, beyond that Freudian argument, it’s a question of the preoccupation with the near-nothingness of artworks, that matters – their capacity not, as it happens,

to reflect or represent reality, but rather to deplete and alter it – thereby, perhaps, doing the opposite, that is enhancing and concentrating it. For if among the most classic and classical definitions of artworks stands that which construes them as mimetic, as reproductions of a real truth, as technical, artistic or skilful copies of nature, then my argument is nothing if not post-classical. For in this supposed representation, something more than the original presence gets lost and in a process not dissimilar from Freudian oneirology or dreamwork – something akin, that is, to condensation and displacement.

Take displacement. Freud says artworks don't so much reflect reality as distort it; what's more, the 'reality' at stake is not the empirical world as susceptible to consensual description, but the experience experienced by an individual and ingested in his or her psyche. Nevertheless Freud assumes – even if subsequently it gets censored, edited or corrupted – an original presence, an experience at some prior point real and true for the person involved. Any displacement is a displacement of something. The later-vitiated origin of the artifact, psychic or aesthetic, is both posited and respected as such; the original experience might get irrecoverably transfigured, but an original experience there incontestably was. Now, I'm not against this idea of an original experience that an artist turns into art – on the contrary, it's fundamental. That said, one might hope, as Freud sometimes suggests, to argue that the given 'original experience' might never have actually happened, but be a retrospective fantasy. Instead of assuming that 'there was' an original experience, one might, again in poststructuralist language, argue instead that there will have been an original experience, some purportedly primary sensory or psychological data that was, in fact, *a posteriori* from the outset. Either way, the Freudian artwork amounts to the redaction of something, real or imaginary, that preceded it. That implies that no artwork is, despite the popular view, creative; having always been preceded by the 'event' which formed its resource, it can't claim to be original or originary – unless the originality of the artwork lies precisely in the refiguring of that resource, in which case what the artwork originates is a working-over of its own origin. Effectively, that's where the Freudian argument stops, and where a different possibility takes over. For to claim the origin of the artwork lies wholly within the experience of its creator is to fall short of a fuller explanation – and one could, at this point, turn towards Heidegger, who campaigned for the origin of the artwork lying in a fundamental ontology, in the wellspring of Being that has a relationship of its own, as you'd expect, with death. But that's not the turn I want to make: instead I would like to elaborate the possibility that the origin of the artwork did not, in order for that artwork to come about, have to

exist as such. In Freudian terms, it could have been imagined or invented by the artist. But what if one went further, and said the artwork depends on a radical emptiness, an ‘absence’ that, in a moment, I’ll recalibrate with the death-drive. For artworks, *qua* artworks, can get away without positing reality of any kind – or, if not not positing, then without assuming the positing and positioning of what’s real. What, if not art, is free to free itself from the constraints of reality? And is that freedom not definitive? Insofar as ‘art’ makes sense as a category, it would have to be exempted from respecting reality, even to the point of excising ‘reality’ from its very origin. Where else can one go for the non-real?

It’s in this non-reality that the death-drive of art might operate, where ‘non-reality’ means not ‘unreal’ as in fantastical or crazy but ‘not posited as such’ or ‘not claiming status’. Perhaps ‘irreal’ is the better term. I am describing something that is ‘there’, like a painting, without being there. Yes, the painting exists as an object, a canvas, a frame, a smear of paint, but as an artwork it can repudiate reality and being. And if painting is too obvious a choice, it can apply to songs or poems or even buildings. It’s the freedom to exist without reference to existence, to pass without an indication of being, that might define the artwork and ally it with the death-drive. It’s not death, if death is nothingness, but a variety of ‘being’ without reality – retaining a relationship to what is, but inorganic and, in principle, free from what is. This means that what’s creative about the artwork is its lifting-away from needing to posit, from having to be positive, its licence never to deal with the real. The artwork needn’t set anything down, needn’t commit to an assertion or statement, and, without compromising itself in any way, may remain suspended from reality. It’s almost by definition a creative space, therefore, that it occupies – or a sphere of freedom. Free from what is, from the real, from being and from the posited, the artwork – which nevertheless takes physical form as inanimate phenomena, be they in the spatial or temporal arts – refrains from contributing to the world of things.

I would argue that this constitutive power to hold being and reality at bay, to pass beyond or behind what’s real or present, to slough off the world as the presentation of phenomena, means the death-drive works as the silent motor of the artwork. As it were the ‘spirit’ of the artwork, the death-drive carries the artwork away from all that is, from all that is ‘there’, and in so doing protects it as an artwork. Any ‘representations’ of life that the artwork bears – in the realist novel, say – will come second, after this constitutive energy in the artwork, its death-drive, to find itself in what is not real, present, posited or given. Rather than seeing the artwork according to the Platonic schema, as a ‘copy of a copy’, we might say the artwork begins precisely in a turning-away from

phenomena, in the right to digress from what is. Not that its turn away from the real becomes, in a counter-Platonic move, a turn towards the ideal. Even where its subject-matter is reality – a painting of a harbour – its aesthetic status derives from the latitude it has to have no concern with realities, and stop there; and so, when we look at the painting, we're seeing an essentially unreal portrayal of real things, but in a non-Platonic sense. The artwork looks at the world in such a way that, even as it begins to 'reflect' it, it will have already repudiated what it sees, will have already implicitly known it could have got along without it. The content or the subject-matter remain the content or the subject-matter, but qua artwork the artwork will treat them only as pragmatic resources, as material that could be substituted for other material, and that remains exterior to the artwork which always reserves the ability to reject it.

I'm not saying merely that all artworks are fictive or imaginary, but that the privilege they enjoy, and which defines them, of not being bound by anything that is, by what is given, means they are irreducibly organised by a death-drive, an adherence or loyalty to a state of impulsive disengagement with anything beyond themselves. In an important sense, artworks are not of this world. It is, if you like, the 'principle' of art to exonerate itself from worldly concerns; its condition of possibility is that it rejects all that is, even if subsequently it comes to host, as it were, worldly material.

The reader might hear in this allusions to 'art for art's sake', but the privilege I refer to is not in that sense 'aesthetic', not about an ideal. The opening gesture of the artwork, before it exists, will have been to destroy for its own purposes the phenomenal world it finds itself in. In schematic terms, if there were a world of the real, and a world of the ideal, then we might introduce the possibility of a third dimension, inhabited by the death-drive and the aesthetic, and this is the co-existence, within life, of what seeks to nullify it, of what operates by what might be called a radical asceticism. As this death-in-life, the artwork turns away from everything that is, thus creating a space not of the actual, but of the possible, the imaginary, the unreal, the rhetorical and the suggestive.

## Notes

1. Insofar as masochism constitutes an injury perpetrated by the self upon the self, and might involve some albeit perverse pleasure, then masochism can always be seen as the thin end of the wedge, and no less distinguished a critic than Jean Laplanche orients his great work on life and death in psychoanalysis from this point of view. See Jean Laplanche, *Vie et Mort en*

*Psychanalyse, suivi de Dérivation des Entités Psychanalytiques* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970).

2. The suspicion with which Freud's text has been treated continues to this day. Perhaps the most hot-headed version of it in recent years is that of Todd Dufresne in his *Tales from the Freudian Crypt: The Death Drive in Text and Context* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), which talks spitefully of 'gullible patients and academics' (p. 184).
3. Frank J. Sulloway, *Freud, Biologist of the Mind: Beyond the Psychoanalytic Legend* (London: Burnett Books, in association with André Deutsch, 1979), p. 402.
4. *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. Juliet Mitchell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), pp. 46–7.
5. Jean Laplanche, *Vie et Mort en Psychanalyse, suivi de Dérivation des Entités Psychanalytiques* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970), p. 13. My translation.
6. Richard Boothby, *Death and Desire: Psychoanalytic Theory in Lacan's Return to Freud* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), p. 104.
7. *SE*, XVIII, pp. 14–17.
8. Jacqueline Rose, *Why War? Psychoanalysis, Politics and the Return to Melanie Klein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 112.
9. Jacques Derrida, 'To Speculate – on "Freud"', in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 257–410. It's also worth noting that many people now quote Freud's statement that 'the aim of all life is death' as if it were straight to camera, so to speak, while forgetting to add the italics Freud used and the number of conditionals he applied. What he actually wrote was: 'If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for *internal* reasons – becomes inorganic once again – then we shall be compelled to say that "*the aim of all life is death*" and, looking backwards, that "*inanimate things existed before living ones*"' (*SE*, XVIII, p. 38).
10. *Ibid.*, p. 259.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 411–96.
12. Richard Boothby, *Death and Desire: Psychoanalytic Theory in Lacan's Return to Freud* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), p. 71.
13. Quoted by Richard Boothby in *ibid.*, p. 10.
14. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1977), p. 103.
15. *SE*, XXI, p. 122.
16. Norman O. Brown, *Life against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959), p. 101.
17. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin Press, 1969), p. 24.
18. J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, with an Introduction by Daniel Lagache, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac Books and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1988), p. 380.
19. An analogous claim is made by Lee Edelman, who interprets this 'surplus' as a value of queerness: 'The drive – more exactly, the death drive – holds a privileged place in this book. As the constancy of a pressure both alien

and internal to the logic of the Symbolic, as the inarticulable surplus that dismantles the subject from within, the death drive names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability.' Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 9.

20. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 156.
21. It's especially worth being aware of this given the account by Jonathan Dollimore, say, in his ambitious book on death in western culture, whose opening pages rather too easily appropriate Foucault's work in order to associate sexuality and death: Jonathan Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Literature* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin Press, 1998).
22. I refer to the title of Simon Critchley's *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997).
23. Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001). See in particular Royle's chapter on the death-drive (pp. 84–106).
24. *SE*, XVII, p. 241.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
26. *SE*, XIV, p. 305.
27. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1977), p. 102.
28. Frank J. Sulloway, *Freud, Biologist of the Mind: Beyond the Psychoanalytic Legend* (London: Burnett Books, in association with André Deutsch, 1979), p. 395.



## Memento Mori

Philosopher, c'est apprendre à mourir. (Montaigne)

Being – we have no idea of it other than ‘living’. – How can anything dead ‘be’? (Nietzsche)

What, then, is it to cross the ultimate border? . . . Is it possible? Who has ever done it and who can testify to it? (Derrida)

‘Once is never’ – this phrase, according to Peter Szondi, encapsulates the golden rule of science and all verifiable knowledge in general. What occurs only once poses something intolerable and indeed impossible for scientific thinking: it cannot be verified and so escapes the order of knowledge as the ground of certainty. How can we be certain of what happens only once? *Einmal ist keinmal* – scientific thinking views the particular only as a specimen, a species implicitly or explicitly belonging to a genus. Knowledge is derived by inference from specific cases in respect of a general order. In the essay from 1962 entitled ‘On Textual Understanding’ it is literary criticism which Szondi charges with too readily embracing this scientific code of practice when on the contrary it should pause to consider the extreme possibility raised by the way in which tropes work in literary texts, that of existing at random and in relation to no other figural or literal moment, eluding verifiability and thus breaching scientific decorum.<sup>1</sup> I will come back to this but mainly I want to follow a different set of implications provoked by Szondi’s insight into science’s repression of the singular, its sidelining or denial of it. They concern our knowledge about death. Paul de Man in a later essay (1979) perhaps influenced by Szondi develops this notion of the absolute contingency of the literary trope and associates it with what he thinks of as the random power of death.<sup>2</sup> I read this random power of death, its absolute contingency, its sheer unrelatedness and saturated specificity, in terms of the requirement that it happen to us only once.

Death can be experienced only once by definition for death is the death of experience *überhaupt*. Superficially one might ask, ‘what could be more particular, more “real” and thus more choice for a scientific materialism than an event so specific that it happens just once and which therefore cannot in principle belong to an idealising, totalising scheme of history?’ Its particularity could not be gainsaid and no idealist historicism could assimilate it. At the same time, however, such an opportunity brings on a crisis for scientific materialism which thereby reaches its own limit, for it finds an object, an event so specific or singular that it may be unthinkable, no apparatus may comprehend it, and thus an aporia between materialism and the scientific credibility it aspires to is lit up. This singularity of death, its particularity and one-offness, constitutes one of at least two essential characteristics, the other being that insisted on by Heidegger, namely that no one can die my death in my place – it is unavoidable – which would be a second form of death’s uniqueness. ‘Death’, Heidegger writes, ‘is *Dasein*’s *ownmost* possibility’.<sup>3</sup> This is not to be confused with cases of sacrifice in which someone dies for another. The phrase ‘to die for another’ misleads us for the sacrificial victim will still die his or her own death in dying for another, and only metaphorically or by elision can they be said to die someone else’s death. I shall examine such specificity. The question that emerges is: ‘If Death happens to us only once how can we have any knowledge of it?’ Can the golden rule be applied here? Surely science wouldn’t say that because death can be experienced only once that it therefore never happens? What does it mean for something to have to happen only once – both *to have to happen* only once and to have to happen *only once* – to be intrinsically unrepeatable, and what are the consequences for our knowledge about it? What follows is a brief inquiry into the status of our knowledge about death in the light not only of this ‘onceness’ and specificity but also of other aspects, for example whether death can be known as certain or if not as certain then as fictional, rhetorical or speculative; whether we can be absolutely certain of it and yet forget it; and how it conditions human experience. In short, how can we *think* death?

### Three responses to Pascal

I would like to begin with two excerpts from a letter of Pascal:<sup>4</sup>

You do not need a greatly elevated soul to realise that in this life there is no true and firm satisfaction, that all our pleasures are simple vanity, that our

afflictions are infinite, and lastly that death, which threatens us at every moment, must in a few years infallibly present us with the appalling necessity of being either annihilated or wretched for all eternity.

And a few paragraphs later:

Nothing is so important to man as his condition. Nothing is so frightening to him as eternity. And so the fact that there are men indifferent to the loss of their being and to the peril of an eternity of wretchedness is not natural. They are quite different with regard to everything else: they fear even the most insignificant things, they foresee them, feel them, and the same man who spends so many days and nights in rage and despair over the loss of some office or over some imaginary affront to his honour is the very one who, without anxiety or emotion, knows he is going to lose everything through death. It is a monstrous thing to see in the same heart and at the same time both this sensitivity to the slightest things, and this strange insensitivity to the greatest.

It is ‘monstrous’, in Pascal’s eyes, to be so negligent of the fact of death, our ‘condition’. In order to contemplate and respond to his righteous indignation we need to make a distinction between forgetting death and forgetting about the fact that we are going to die. Clearly Pascal has his mind on this second form. After all one will never be able to remember one’s own death. That is something that death brings, an end to memory, the impossibility of remembering anything ever again including the death which imposed the impossibility. Rilke in the first of the *Duino Elegies* says that in death you lose even your own first name.<sup>5</sup> Death cannot be remembered. Rather, one remembers or ought to remember *that* one will die. One is called to a ‘that’, a direction or attribute; a grammar routes the thought, adjusting it toward a determinate content, that one will die. However, this determinate content turns out to be empty. Because it happens only once we cannot know what this ‘that’ points towards in saying that we will die. In this regard the thought is meaningless. This determinate and absolutely certain thought that we will die subsists undetermined. The thought of death presents itself as thoroughly unique in this regard. No other thought in the world manages absolute certainty and complete indeterminacy at the same time. The price paid for abundant certainty is lack of content. I am certain of something I absolutely do not know. Only the ‘that’ of death can ever be invoked and precisely because death occurs only once and precludes any subsequent reflection on it; death precludes all subsequence, or more succinctly still, *death precludes*. ‘We are a sign,’ as Hölderlin says, ‘meaningless’. There is a sense but there is no meaning; there is direction but no horizon.

And yet, *given* its certainty, how is it possible to ignore or even forget *about* death? If Pascal prickles at the indifference of those who do not ruminate upon it, there must be a prior possibility that death can indeed be forgotten. The stately fact of death in all its gravity and relevance for the human condition may be set aside, overlooked or, what's worse for Pascal, relegated in favour of more immediate worldly concerns.

Is it not strange to have to *remember* that one must die? That one has to be *reminded* of *this*, the most crucial and determining condition of one's existence? For insofar as death can be forgotten it forfeits its pre-eminence as a fact; in its forgettability it stands on a par with all else that may be forgotten; I can forget about death just as I might forget my umbrella. It could well be proved an epistemological or psychological law that nothing exists which cannot in principle be forgotten, but the forgettability of *death* – is that not a scandal of some sort? Ought that not to be a special case when it comes to remembering and forgetting? Isn't there something hubristic or at least irreverent in forgetting about death, some failure to salute an absolute authority? Is it not simply too important to forget even for a moment? St Paul writes in his letter to the Thessalonians of the requirement to pray without ceasing: isn't something equal to that required for the thought of death? Socrates in the *Phaedo* (80c – 81) even speaks of the soul as that which emerges through meditation on death. The soul comes into its own through a separation from the body, growing thereby into its condition as 'wisdom' or thought which is nothing but an apprehension of the soul's final separation from corporeality, the intimation of its own being-towards-death. For Socrates all thought, as a form of "practising death" (80e), should be directed towards this end. The soul *becomes* itself, identifies itself, through this meditation on death. As the epigraph from Montaigne echoed, 'philosopher, c'est apprendre à mourir'. And one could go further and conclude from Socrates that if death is the most appropriate state for the soul because it is the most non-corporeal and the most intellectual state, then such a death cannot be told apart from the pure exercise of the intellect, that is wisdom or philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

And yet this solemn task of thought may be forgotten. I can think of three responses to this bizarre opportunity which humans possess of forgetting about the one thing of which they are certain, the fact that we shall die. The first response comes by turning the question round to make it not 'how is it possible to forget about death?' but 'how would it be possible to *have to remember* it?' What would it mean for something that it would *absolutely have to be* remembered, to the extent that it absolutely would be remembered for certain? For if something *must* be remembered absolutely – with an absoluteness not to be circumscribed

– and therefore *will be* remembered in each case, then the notion of memory, paradoxically, no longer makes sense and falls away. The certainty that death would for sure be remembered because it absolutely had to be would do away with the responsibility at the heart of memory, the responsibility which counts simultaneously as memory's possible failure and its only chance. It would no longer be necessary to remember death because death would *absolutely have to be* remembered. Under an absolute injunction there can be no question of its being forgotten; we need no reminding to remember it. An *absolute* injunction to remember amounts to an invitation to forget. A responsibility conditions memory, injects it with a kind of free will, making it real by giving it the chance to select and to default on what it collects and recollects. Which is as much as to say that memory *qua* memory can never be absolute. If not structured by the possibility of forgetting, the experience of memory would become mere programmatic, unreflective, irresponsible retention that would involve no *remembering* as such at all.

This would be the first response to Pascal. How is it possible to forget about death? Because it is impossible absolutely to remember it. The possibility that I forget it furnishes the condition of my remembering. Only insofar as I might forget it does my remembering death become meaningful.

This paradox may be transposed onto an ethical plane to produce a second response. It may look like hubris or disrespect that from time to time I forget about death in its absoluteness, its sovereignty, its authority, but that's just how memory works. Thus I remember-and-forget, respect death and disrespect it. This reveals something about the ethics of respect. The call to respect death, such as Pascal's, unfortunately cannot be answered in a straightforward way. To respect death faithfully, to acknowledge its precedence and incontrovertibility, requires two irreconcilable gestures simultaneously, and this applies to all forms of respect. The practice of respect demands on the one hand that I concern myself with its object (in this case death), that I take it to myself, dwell on it, incorporate it and as it were watch over it, care for it, my respectful concern drawing me to an appropriation of it, a becoming busy with it, an allowing of it to fill me up, to learn it, to study it, to know it, become instructed in it and give myself over to it in its difference and otherness from me; but on the other hand and owing precisely to that difference and otherness, my respect for death enjoins on me the contrary gesture, of letting it go, respecting it as other, as different and distinct from me, needing to be released, never to suffer the injury and inappropriateness of my appropriation of it, my intentions for it, my crude assimilation which would turn its otherness into my sameness

and thus no longer respect it as *it*. Respect in general and the respect for death in particular necessitates this ambiguous intention both to know and not to know, to solicit and to relinquish, and thus my forgetting about death contains an ethical rightness in performing one half of the divided gesture that respect demands, that of letting go, of the movement towards not knowing at all about death, giving up any rights over it, as a sign of my respect for it. Risk, rather than truth, informs the concept of respect, for not to incorporate and not to know death in the respecting of it runs the risk of disregarding, abandoning and thus disrespecting it altogether. It is within this horizon of risk that the *ethics* of respect emerges. What would an ethics be which didn't involve some responsibility and therefore risk, imperfect knowledge, prior hesitation and the freedom that derives from having no certain, prescribed course of action to pursue? The decorum of respect entails an essential anxiety in the perpetual struggle between an apprehension of its object (death in this case) and a non-apprehension, one that could be said to be matched by the interfusing and undecided movement between remembering and forgetting. To know death as death, through the figure of absolute respect which it imposes, is also to abjure the knowing of it. Just as I remember-and-forget death, having no choice but to switch back and forth, so also I acknowledge it carefully, anxiously, through knowing and not-knowing, approaching and withdrawing, respecting it thereby at the risk of disrespect and unobservance, this being the very risk by which my respect achieves validity.

As for the third response as to how it is possible to forget death, we can elaborate on the absolute injunction from the first response and with it raise the question of *force*. The phrase 'memento mori' which I have taken as a title means 'remember you must die'. You must die, of course, but there are two kinds of 'must', two orders of obligation at issue. First, the order of 'you must because you are ordered to', 'you must because I tell you', 'you must do this or else'. Some empirical stricture binds you, and this stricture belongs to the realm of positive law, of force as enforcement where a 'must' must be enforced because it could go unheeded. Thus the force in this first case is a symptom of a basic weakness. If it's necessary to prescribe that you stop at a red light, it is because it is always possible for you not to; this possibility has therefore to be countered positively by a law which says you must stop. Obviously this is not the kind of 'must' involved in death. The phrase 'remember you must die' does not stipulate that we must die because without such a stipulation we might not. It pertains to a different category of must. You must die because you will die, order or no order. No one could give the order to die more strongly, more forcefully than it is already given.

Try it. This is a law that does not need to express itself as an order and requires no enforcement. It could be called force without force. So forceful that it needs no forcing, the force of mortality thus differs from the gratuity pertaining to the first kind. And this throws up the question of the ambiguity of force in general: force is both essentially gratuitous – where force is required, there has been some lack of force prior to it for which it is making up – but at the same time force achieves an immanence within itself, a perfect entelechy whose force lies in exactly such self-sufficiency and containment.

The phrase ‘remember you must die’ belongs to the second category of obligation. As such it requires no recollection, unlike in the first where every time I stop at a red light I am in a sense reminded of a law (which could in principle be forgotten). From this perspective the phrase becomes redundant. There is no need for me to remember I must die; it will come about regardless of my remembering it; it is simply the case and dispenses with any need to be recalled or invoked, sublimely indifferent to human apprehension of it. As a third and final response to ‘how is it possible to forget about death?’ we can therefore say that to remember it in any case is irrelevant. A human remembering makes no difference to it; that we must die is so unassailably true that it has no need of being sheltered in and by our memories. And so equally we can forget it without any consequence.

In this last aspect death becomes that which deprives us of any meaningful psychic relation to it. We might wonder what the consequences of this would be for psychologies of death, and specifically any psychoanalysis of it. What possible ground could there be for the death-drive, for example? The psychic pursuit of death as suggested by Freud, the exercise of the death instincts, in a sense implies that death must indeed be pursued as if it were not the inevitability it is. What need a death instinct? No instinct for it is required. If the death instinct is a *drive* as Freud’s German word *Todestrieb* indicates, this drive qua drive appears supererogatory, gratuitous, for death requires no driving towards. Pre-emptingly it outstrips all psychic relation to it, conscious or unconscious.<sup>7</sup>

Where, then, and how can death be apprehended? I would now like to bridge from Pascal to Heidegger. We have begun to see some of the difficulties in conceptualising death. Heidegger will suggest that our mistake is in viewing death as actual rather than possible, which I shall try to explain in a moment. In general a move that might be made is one that takes us away from an epistemology of death, away from the language of apprehension, away from the dimension of consciousness (a dimension that includes unconsciousness). In relation to the last point,

for example, about psychoanalysis, there are already resources for thinking in a new direction. The *Todestrieb* finds its motor not only in the psyche. The drive of the death-drive, according to Freud, that which urges the psychic drive in a particular direction, lodges in the organic determinations of psychic development, prior even to the formation of the unconscious. If the psyche tends towards its own death, it may be due to a phylogenetic link with its pre-psychical past as simple organism. The death-drive comprises an a-psychic element, a purely organic or biological compulsion to return to a state of absolute simplicity that can be called death. The point is that the psychic relation to death can be conceived in a way that includes an a-psychic component. Psychoanalysis moves in this direction, as does the fundamental ontology of Heidegger. Both gesture towards a structural, pre-psychological relation to death of the human being, though of the two it is Heidegger we shall pursue.

### The possibility of death

Towards the very end of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the narrator muses on his time running out, how age caps artistic endeavour:

For the fundamental fact was that I had a body, and this meant that I was perpetually threatened by a double danger, internal and external, though to speak thus was merely a matter of linguistic convenience, the truth being that the internal danger – the risk, for example, of a cerebral haemorrhage – is also external, since it is the body that it threatens. Indeed it is the possession of a body that is the great danger to the mind, to our human and thinking life, which it is surely less correct to describe as a miraculous entelechy of animal and physical life than as an imperfect essay – as rudimentary in this sphere as the communal existence of protozoa attached to their polyparies or as the body of the whale – in the organisation of the spiritual life. The body immures the mind within a fortress; presently on all sides the fortress is besieged and in the end, inevitably, the mind has to surrender.<sup>8</sup>

We arrived at this juncture from a third response to Pascal which said that death needed no remembering, thus frustrating psychic relation to it. A mind–body dualism underlies the point for we are implying that because the *body* is going to die anyway there is no need for the mind to accommodate the fact of death in any fashion. Proust writes pointedly of this disjunction, what could be called the ‘dyschronic’ link between the two systems that human beings consist in. Death discloses this dualism between the apparent and illusory immortality of the mind and the certain, felt mortality of the body. The mind would not necessarily surrender were not its bodily ramparts eroding.

True, death actually happens and it happens 'to' the body while the mind plausibly might survive indefinitely; similarly, the body is caught up absolutely in time's forward movement while the mind can skip about over the surface of time, recalling, anticipating, imagining, not shackled to the present. In these simple terms, death appears as an event, that which comes, that which happens. The body arrives at death, or death arrives at the body, and once the body falls the mind must fall too; it goes down like a captain with his ship. It is an event. We think death in terms of actual event-time. If we think of it as happening it is because we think of its taking place in the course of such time. But in so thinking, Heidegger warns us, 'death gets passed off as always something 'actual'; its character as a possibility gets concealed'. Let us examine this character of possibility that death has.

Pascal's vexation depended on the *actuality* of death, whose actuality as actual *allows for* psychological cognisance of it albeit in the impeded manner we have sketched. What, by contrast, is death's *possibility*? What kind of a possibility is death? Heidegger answers that 'death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein'. What kind of possibility is this? Two orders of possibility open up, one at the centre of Heideggerian thought, and another which will take us away from Heidegger through Derrida and back to De Man. The first kind of possibility, the Heideggerian kind, also bears a kind of force. We have already enumerated two kinds of force: that of positive law which requires enforcement and that of actual death which requires no enforcement but which in flagging death as a *factum brutum* depends on a rather unrefined materialism of the body, a biologism. Heideggerian possibility too represents a force in that it signals power. Possibility is strong because it gestures to its own ability, capacity, faculty, to do or to make. The Latin 'posse' from which the English 'possibility' comes abbreviates the phrase 'potis esse', which is having the power and the *potency* and the 'can' as the force to do something. The German 'Möglichkeit' which Heidegger uses for 'possibility' relates to 'Macht' for 'power'. And death, for Heidegger, marks some kind of possibility though its power, as I shall try to show, is nothing more or less than rhetorical.

In a very general sense the force of possibility constitutes the strongest force conceivable. It makes something possible; it claims some worldly change; it envisions an adjustment of the very future; it forces open a virtual space where nothing had existed. But one should not conflate this idea with the notion that anything is possible. Virtual space, one could say, gives the easiest space of all to open. It takes no force to open, just a little imagination, for any possibility may be conceived – there is no resistance, at one level, in the realm of the imagination. This does

not amount to creating the conditions for the possibility of something, however. There is a difference between the received idea of the possible as that which might become actual in the future and already exists in the realm of virtual actuality, on the one hand, what we could call 'soft' possibility; and the possible as a transcendental condition, on the other – 'hard' possibility perhaps. Death is a hard possibility.

How does Heidegger conceive it? It is death itself which allows us to conceive it for, to put it baldly, death annihilates actuality *per se*. He writes:

The closest closeness which one may have in Being towards death as a possibility, is as far as possible from anything actual. *The more unveiledly this possibility gets understood, the more purely does the understanding penetrate into it* as the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all. *Death, as possibility, gives Dasein nothing to be 'actualised', nothing which Dasein, as actual, could itself be . . . Being-towards-death, as anticipation of possibility, is what first makes this possibility possible, and sets it free as possibility.*<sup>9</sup>

Since actuality vanishes at death, destroyed by death, the only character available to death can be that of possibility. Death bears the force of the entirely non-actual – '*Death, as possibility, gives Dasein nothing to be "actualised"*'. It bears the force of possibility which, qua possibility, calls for a concept of anticipation in regard to it – with the proviso that anticipation anticipates nothing actual, belonging rather to a structure of time that opens elsewhere than into the actual, and thus once more pre-empts any *psychological* apprehension thereof. Onceness again – death never happens not so much because it *never* happens but because it never *happens*. It is unhappening. In this sense death cannot even be experienced. Death is an 'event' without beginning or end. There is no 'death'; there is only the stopping of life, the notion of 'death' a mere personification of that stopping. As such its possibility will have withdrawn from the realm of the actual and of empirical time, becoming even harder than 'hard'; it is hyper-transcendental. It holds the status of something entirely structural, preceding all empiricism, all psychism, and if this possibility has power it is the power or force of that which can never become vulnerable because it never 'exists', never comes into time. Death does not die in time. I would suggest that the deathliness of death – its sheer incontestability – resides precisely in this, its having already been constituted as possibility. On account of never being actualised the possibility of death is effectively a *perpetual* possibility; but insofar as it is also the perpetual possibility of *death*, the last thing it can be is perpetual, for it must die. We are forced to think the possibility of death as perpetual and finite at the same time.

There are one or two comments relating to what has already been said that may be made about this structure. Firstly, where we spoke about the forgettability of death we can apply a new filter to our thoughts. If we forget about death it is not only because remembering it creates problems in the ways suggested but also because of a more stringent reason. There is no forgetting or remembering of death to be had for, according to Heidegger at least, its deep character is one of possibility which pre-empts and remains absolutely foreign – not just indifferent – to apprehension of it. How is it possible, other than through some mystificatory theory of anamnesis, to remember or forget something which entirely outflanks the actual? True, one can remember things that are not ‘actual’, such as fictional narratives or lies, but even these are subtended by a virtual actuality. Secondly, the notion of forgetting and remembering we have been using has been rather naive, suggestive of a simple consciousness at work. What about unconscious forgetting or repression? But even here we can say that death’s possibility remains intact for it does not appear in any form whatsoever, harbouring its structurality, thus offering nothing of itself, no matter, to repress. If there is repression at large it pertains to possibility *as* repression, as that which will never become actualised. Which means too that death ‘is’ repression, is the object of that possibility as the impossibility of any actualisation – an impossibility which perhaps may be called absolute repression. What more effective repression could be envisaged than one which precludes actualisation in general?

We commonly use the word ‘possible’ to refer to something which may or may not happen; it might happen precisely to the extent it also might not. Heidegger’s notion, by contrast, has the sense that the possible *certainly will not happen*, death forcing the paradox, it being ‘*the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all*’. Why does he not use the word ‘necessity’ for this condition? Why does he not write that death is the *necessity* of the impossibility of any existence at all? One could venture answers such as ‘because necessity belongs to the order of actuality whereas death is nothing actual’, but there is a more fruitful line. In our quotation Heidegger said that ‘Being-towards-death, as anticipation of possibility, is what first *makes* this possibility *possible*, and sets it free as possibility’. As such the possibility of death is created not given, *made by* Being-towards-death, and to this extent ‘contingent’.

But isn’t that preposterous? Can death really be contingent? Can *it* (death!) lack transcendental force? Let’s read Heidegger’s sentence again: ‘Being-towards-death, as anticipation of possibility, is what first *makes* this possibility *possible*, and sets it free as possibility.’ We could object that there will have had to be death before its being made

possible by Being-towards-death, if only because the latter is just that, *Being-towards-death*, aiming at the death it purports to make possible. Yet *Being-towards-death*, as *Being-towards-death* must indeed precede death, for there must be Being in some form in order for there to be death (and in this sense also death is contingent – on the existence of living things which, *as living*, *can* die; there would be no *death* if there were no life, this suggesting an important respect in which death differs from nothingness which must be absolutely uncontingent). There is a contingency of death, then, in that its possibility must be made, created rather than received, but a contingency not to be confused with the contingency of what might have been otherwise, with the optional. It was not possible for this possibility of death *not* to be made for it inheres in Being as *Being-towards-death*, but all this does not quite add up to a necessity, and it is in the space that the spectrality and rhetoric of death opens up.

### Death persuades me with an image

In deference to the work of Nietzsche, Ricoeur, De Man and Derrida on it, I elect the term ‘promise’ to indicate this space where necessity and contingency overlap and where possibility is perpetual yet finite. Death may be inevitable but not so inevitable and not so transcendentally forceful that its possibility exists prior to being made; it necessarily will happen, but rather a *fortiori* than *a priori*, its necessity depleted by the fact that its happening is not an actuality but a possibility; and as possibility – one which, moreover, requires being *made* – it also *depends*. It is simultaneously necessary and contingent and to capture the internal energy of this aporetic link the notion of the promise appears helpful. A promise also is both necessary and contingent, assuring an outcome while risking exposure to all that precedes it. Death appears both necessary and contingent and can only be possible because it will itself have done away with actuality, so all it can *ever* do is promise itself. There will never be an actuality of fulfilment for it.

This promissory structure of death represents the other kind of possibility mentioned above. The first was of a more orthodox Heideggerian kind, shall we say, of the possibility of death as something structural. While not opposing Heidegger in this new view we are nonetheless finding room in his account for thought of a distinctly post-Heideggerian kind. As promise death begins to appear both speculative and rhetorical. It therefore continues to defy any epistemic certainty we might have about it, remaining without determinate content. In this respect we

truly are departing from Heidegger who contrasts the being certain with regard to one's death with cases in which one merely has a view about something or another. In the same section as quoted of *Being and Time* he talks of the kind of certainty that applies 'in any arbitrary fiction or in merely having some "view" ["Ansicht"]': in such cases, he says, the kind of certainty one has about death 'is lacking'.<sup>10</sup> There exist in other words two distinct and even opposite types of certainty, one exclusively to do with death, the other with having a view about arbitrary things in general. But from what we have seen, very little difference obtains in fact between our supposed certainty about death and the relation we might have to something arbitrary or fictional. For if death, bearing nothing that could be actualised yet sustaining possibility, is structured like a promise, and thus has a character that is both rhetorical and speculative, then we can be certain about it only in the mode of the kind of trust or credulousness we bring to the reception of just such arbitrary fictions. And all the more so in that the promise does not pertain to real time, to the time of actuality. A *transcendental* promise engages us, one which does not bind itself to an empirical future but which, like a fiction, takes place in the realm of pure possibility. Indeed the arbitrariness is crucial.

In terms of force this means that although absolutely certain, death can never be stronger than a promise. It is both absolutely certain and not absolutely certain, for the mode of its certainty, taking place outside actuality, thereby renders the certainty inaccessible. It becomes absolutely certain precisely because not subject to that actuality which would always maintain some threat, no matter how small, to certainty, in that it could vary events unpredictably; but in becoming so very certain, the certainty of death becomes impossible to establish. Hence the force of death interrupts itself in making itself absolute. It has to weaken itself to be as forceful as it is. It has become so forceful that it has absconded from and even done away with the realm in which its force can be expressed, for it has obliterated actuality. It has reached the level of a hyper-absoluteness in which mere absoluteness has been superseded with the both weaker and stronger quasi-absoluteness of a promise, and so on and so forth. Having becoming slightly 'weaker' through its absolute strength, it must resort to a kind of sublime rhetoric to affirm its force.

In terms of 'being', however, things appear simpler at first sight. Nothing in the transcendental workings of the promise disturbs the being to which it appends. Yes, its relation to death in *Being-towards-death* gets complexified by the promise, but 'being' stays in place as the promise's transcendental referent or counterweight. To this extent our analysis remains soundly metaphysical, upholding a tradition of

thinking about the promise as a kind of stabilising element in concepts of being. In another De Man essay, for example, the author says in a footnote that Nietzsche derives the transcendental referent, 'man', from the promise:<sup>11</sup> man is distinguished from animals by his capacity to synthesise his identity forcefully over time and making promises affords a pre-eminent modality of such continuity; man outfaces the contingency of history, wilfully posing his promise and thus himself as what will override the future. I shall come back to this, the point for now being that the promise offers a means of configuring the future according to one's will, thus in a sense anthropomorphising time, assuring the ontological power of the one animal capable of making promise – man, who achieves a transcendental continuity, a self-necessity in the face of the accidents otherwise looming. Paul Ricoeur makes a similar point though with an emphasis more on the duty to the future than the mastery over it of the promising animal. For Ricoeur the promise binds its maker to the future in an ethical way which enjoins responsibilities on him or her – and again an ontological substrate forms.<sup>12</sup>

But surely the transcendental promise as we have introduced it would fail to support an ontology? Not only does it not pertain to an actual time in which being could be sustained but it promises the non-actualisation of being *per se*. And besides, the promise of death is not made by anyone, is not the object of an intention, thus one could not derive a subjective agent for it with ontological properties. The promise of death must indeed concern the death of being or of a being – for as we said, only being can die – and to this extent we cannot simply deny or bypass the ontological dimension; but at the same time we are obliged to consider a more enigmatic kind of death which radiates at the limit of ontology. We must try to think this very difficult aspect of death.

As promised death is coming but not as anything actual. In this sense it does not come at all; it cannot come for there is no actuality for it to penetrate. Its coming conforms rather to an already-here. What is promised has already been given for though only ever promised it cannot be deferred since no actuality exists into which to project it. It will have already insinuated itself. This would be the structure raised by the transcendental or rather quasi- or hyper-transcendental promise. Death consigns us not only to an actual death to come but also to a being already dead; contained in the 'towards' of Being-towards-death is an echo of the death that has preceded it, thus one travels towards the thing one has departed from.

In this respect actual death, the common-sense version of death, might look like the typological fulfilment or the prophetic completion of the death that has taken place surreptitiously beforehand. In dying one is catching up with death as in a kind of delayed effect, and in saying this

I have in mind not only theoretical work on this subject – by Freud, of course, in terms of *Nachträglichkeit* and by Žižek in not dissimilar terms<sup>13</sup> – but also a couple of fictions. There is Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilyich* (to which Heidegger devotes a footnote in *Being and Time*),<sup>14</sup> for example, and a later fiction by Don DeLillo called *Mao II* which seems tacitly to invoke Tolstoy's story. Ivan, having suffered the vicissitudes of a civil service career in Russia, eventually secures a prestigious post in St Petersburg. Full of pride he buys a house in the city for his family and sets about decorating it:

He was so taken up with it all that he often did things himself, rearranging the furniture or the hangings. Once when mounting a step-ladder to show a workman, who did not understand, how he wanted some material draped, he made a false step and slipped, but being a strong and agile person he clung on and only knocked his side against the knob of the window frame. The bruise was painful but it soon passed off. All this time, indeed Ivan Ilyich felt particularly alert and well. 'I feel fifteen years younger,' he wrote.<sup>15</sup>

That trivial knock to his side turns out to be fatal and it works like a memento mori. The story is written so as to suggest the prior necessity of the death, with implications for the vanity of human ambition. The long remainder of the story details the time-lag, so to speak, of the stay of execution, the gap between Ivan's having already died in the knock, his actual death at the end of the tale, and the background sense of the knock on the side marking the irruption of an already-deadness of the man. In DeLillo's story the hero, a writer, on a trip to Israel, receives a slight knock to his side from a car as he steps off a pavement. According to a similar, even identical, structure, the knock turns out to be fatal as if some malign promise has been awakened.<sup>16</sup>

This 'promise', this strangely contingent but indubitable necessity which cannot be proved because never actualised, this promise of being already dead entombs its subject, gives it over even in the midst of its actual life to a kind of mourning. If already dead by this promise the living being has a kind of monumentality conferred upon him or her. In other words the mourning process begins with the beginning of life for life is already a kind of death, the being which lives it promised to a death anterior to it. Life begins and continues with a protest against this constant monumentalisation, against the ceaseless becoming-dead and sclerosis which makes every image of it a death-mask. In terms of the forgettability of death we could therefore offer a fourth response to Pascal. There can be no forgetting of death at all, transcendentally speaking, for every image I have of myself or anyone becomes a remembering of them as dead even while alive, a precocious mourning. My

very self-consciousness becomes posthumous. Every image I have of every animate thing arrives as an object of mourning; though I may forget about death I cannot forget the deathliness of the dead who live around me. And in turn I am subject to the uncontrollable reproduction of myself as 'dead' in the images of me carried by others. Hardened into an image object, my deathly being proliferates irregularly in these fissiparous, sculptural, pseudo-aesthetic forms.

One of a number of inferences derived by Derrida from this situation reveals a sheer forcelessness on the part of actual death.<sup>17</sup> Actual death fails to register, it makes no difference: I can be remembered as dead before dying; actual death does not alter the mode of my being remembered. Rather it is the transcendental promise of death which has power over me, and a hyperbolic power to boot for the promise delivers me over to the other who will have begun mourning for me – not just to a singular other, either, but to the possibility of an endless division and dissemination of my image among every other in general. This is power or force as sheer reproduction and augmentation, reiteration, regeneration, repetition and so on, which is in principle infinite. The promise speaks with a rhetoric that affirms the fission of my self, thus my self-identity and my very being, firing it into a myriad specular structure where I am trapped behind glass so to speak, imaged in the other a million times over. I describe it as rhetoric not only on account of its force, that of identity explosion, but also because – as we must never forget – it remains without a basis in actuality, with all the rhetorical certainty of the unprovable – for this is where rhetoric springs up, in the absence of an apodictic truth. Meanwhile the force of being for its part must consist in resistance to this promise which saturates it but cannot be confronted, the promise that it is already dead, already mourned for, already turned into an icon and thus, before being even begins, already appropriated by the other. And Derrida makes another inference from *this*, namely that the a priori confusion of my self with the other means that the being I have and which dies will not be entirely my own, that the other always dies my death with me and the 'mineness' of my death fails to soak it all up. Which would fly in the face of one of the essential characteristics of death mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, namely that my death is always my own and none can die it for me.

### Once again: such celerity in dying

We have looked with reference to Pascal at some of the problems in conceptualising actual death. We then at Heidegger's prompting changed

the discussion to the level of possibility at which death, though necessary, gives nothing to be actualised, thus creating for itself the character of a perpetual promise. This promise, rather than projecting an actual future, lay in a possibility which as such inhabited a space of the already. The already of the promise of death led in turn to the being-mourned-by-the-other which affects all 'living' things. But our inquiry began with, and here and there referred back to, the 'onceness' of death. This onceness reappears at the juncture we have reached and I shall conclude this chapter with some remarks about it.

It transpires that rather than dying once I die again and again through the other, in the other's image of me. My self-identity such as it is gets posited outside myself in unconnected acts deriving from the rhetoric of a promise. And it is not just rhetoric but fiction which springs up for these images of me abound from my death or absence and are thus not controlled by veracity. They begin with my absence or death, my removal from actuality, thus apocryphal by nature; they can be multiplied and distorted without reference back to a living me, without ratification from anything actual. Derrida says the origin of fiction lies in mourning, in just such 'apocryphal figuration' as he calls it.<sup>18</sup> This generative figuration makes me die over and over in different, distorted non-self-identical versions, makes me die even as it preserves me in multifarious forms.

It is perhaps little wonder then that Paul de Man associates rhetoric with death, as we said back in the first paragraph. De Man wants to stress the true force of both rhetoric and death as stemming from their violent randomness, their absolute disruptiveness and discontinuity. In the essay referred to earlier, for example, he writes that:

[Shelley's] *The Triumph of Life* warns us that nothing, whether deed, word, thought, or text, ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows, or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence.<sup>19</sup>

It is what makes him also deconstruct the Nietzschean concept of the promise we referred to, as that which sustains over time and thus idealises the identity of its wilful, forceful maker. For De Man there would be a force of the promise greater than that of the person who makes it in that the promise *fails*, precisely, to sustain the identity of its maker over time. It would be an act of violent positing without recuperation, somewhat along the lines we have laid out. The promise of death such as we have described it allows for an absolute randomness in the imaging of me by the other who can make images, posit figurations of me in an arbitrary and fictive manner. Thus I am indeed posited, but posited only in

the de Manian, rhetorical sense, as a series of linguistic acts which bear no ideal relation to one another and no transcendental relation to the referent, the me, they 'derive' from. For I begin, begin to be, only within the possibility of this prior distortion and appropriation. A rhetorical machine will have begun to randomly posit my being outside myself owing to the fact that this being is promised to the possibility, rather than the actuality, of death. In this light death appears as the radical intermission of my being per se.

This allows us to conclude that death may indeed remain unknowable in its happening only once. But it happens only once again and again in these severely truncated rhetorical acts that ought not be humanised into a meaningful chain. Each time, each toll of death, is a one-off in that I am fictively distorted in each case, thus bearing only accidental and not essential similarity to myself from one time to the next. A principle of confusion is at work, therefore, allowing me also to be mistaken and misprised. The distortion of my image operates by such a principle of confusion, allowing for mistaken identity, projection, prosopagnosia and the dreams of others' deaths.

### Notes

1. Peter Szondi, 'On Textual Understanding', in *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 13ff.
2. Paul de Man, 'Shelley Disfigured', in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 122. See below for quotation.
3. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), p. 307.
4. Blaise Pascal, 'A Letter to Further the Search for God', in *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 160–2.
5. Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (London: Picador, 1980), p. 155:

Of course, it is strange to inhabit the earth no longer,  
 to give up customs one barely had time to learn,  
 not see roses and other promising Things  
 in terms of a human future; no longer to be  
 what one was in infinitely anxious hands; to leave  
 even one's own first name behind, forgetting it  
 as easily as a child abandons a broken toy.

6. Plato, *The Collected Dialogues*, eds Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 63–6.
7. See in particular Freud's 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', *SE*, XVIII, pp. 1–64.

8. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, Vol. 3, trans. Terence Kilmartin, Andreas Mayor and C. K. Scott Moncrieff (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 1092.
9. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), pp. 306–7.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 300.
11. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 273.
12. See Paul Ricoeur, ‘Self as *Ipse*’, in Barbara Johnson (ed.), *Freedom and Interpretation: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1992* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), pp. 103–19.
13. For references to Freud’s use of this term see J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac Books and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1988), pp. 111–14; Slavoj Žižek, ‘You Only Die Twice’, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), pp. 131–49.
14. An essay on Heidegger’s footnote by Robert Bernasconi, ‘Literary Attestation in Philosophy: Heidegger’s Footnote on Tolstoy’s “The Death of Ivan Ilyich”’, appears in David Wood (ed.), *Philosophers’ Poets* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 7–36.
15. Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 121.
16. Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (London: Vintage, 1991).
17. See Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler and Eduardo Cadava (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).
18. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
19. Paul de Man, ‘Shelley Disfigured’, in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 122.

# The Death-Drive Does Not Think

Setting prices, determining values, contriving equivalences, exchanging – these preoccupied the earliest thinking of man to so great an extent that in a certain sense they constitute thinking as such. (Nietzsche)

My title alludes to an essay by Jean-François Lyotard, ‘The Dream-Work Does Not Think’,<sup>1</sup> which in turn alludes to Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*. The issue is whether the Freudian theory of psychoanalysis construes the individual psyche as having any capacity to *think* whatsoever. It might be problematised thus: if the psychic mechanism is compelled to repeat, can any of its intellects be considered as thought or cogitation, as opposed to Pavlovian reaction? The compulsion to repeat is one – perhaps the arch – element making the psychic mechanism mechanical, hence the structural role it plays, and consequently its tolerance of being notated and theorised. Theoretically it calls for a concept of the death-drive whose presence it betrays: we repeat patterns of mental and social behaviour so as to keep psychic expenditure to a minimum, not risking any authentically new investments, preferring old wine in new bottles no matter how sour in reality it always was. This profoundly conservative attitude is tantamount to a death-drive insofar as a state of minimum exertion, or maximum inertia, is its *telos* – its end, purpose and nature. Thought, were that activity to contain any requirement of intellectual effort, would be anathema to it and could be countenanced only in circumstances where it represented the sole remaining route back to the state of rest, repetition having become for whatever reason unviable. We are practically describing, in Nietzsche’s words, ‘the attempt to win for man an approximation to what in certain animals is *hibernation*, in many tropical plants *estivation*, the minimum metabolism at which life will still subsist without really entering consciousness’.<sup>2</sup> We can disclose an intimate negative connection between thinking and death as *vis inertiae*, a connection which orients the present chapter.

That connection itself connects with a third element, time – with

public time and therefore with history, for ‘history is public time’, to quote from a source I shall return to. How so?

In the aspect of Freudian theory which concerns us, concentrated in the paper ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, the psyche shirks anything but the least exertion possible. For reduction of excitation equals pleasure: an equation that is legitimate because congruent with the Freudian premise which is not ‘I am’ so much as ‘I wish’. For the Freudian psyche, establishing ontological identity is secondary to fulfilling wishes (Lacan would seem to re-philosophise this position by restoring the former to equal prominence). I wish, therefore I am, and pleasure furnishes the constant object of my actions.<sup>3</sup> Freud lends this axiom genetic cladding which I re-describe as follows.

The Oedipal phase occurs when the infant understands the father to be a check to its own access to the mother, imposing the stricture of delay upon the child for whom, in effect, a sense of time is created. To adapt the language of Kant, time arises subjectively as the form of the intuition that there now exists a block to what was previously porous, that I now have to pay for what before was free, that satisfaction has turned out to be a privilege and not a right; time impinges upon me as limit and frustration and the necessity of supererogation. Time implies ‘the other’ and vice versa: if now I have a sense of time it is because the other, whose type is the father, inhabits the same wish-dimension and thus creates the competition which means that in principle I will not always be the first to get what I want and that I will have to bestir myself to make sure of getting it at all. An economy is born.

The genetic schema allows for the psychologicistic interpretation that preoccupies psychoanalysis as a therapeutic institution. For example, if the father impedes my wish-fulfilment, the formative attitude I hold toward him is that of vengeful rival, while in this moment of Oedipal pathos – in a sense the first moment of pathos of any kind in the infant’s young life – I realise I love the mother, though it is only in the context of hating the father that loving the mother has any meaning or value. I am now conscious of my wishes even though, cruelly enough, this coincides with the consciousness that they may well remain unfulfilled. Such is the condition of consciousness, in truth. In its circularity the argument resembles that concerning the Big Bang and the origin of time. For I now have wishes only because some obstacle to them has new-fangled them as wishes, whereas in the pre-lapsarian phase I had neither wish nor no-wish, I merely prosecuted my animal functions without either consciousness or unconsciousness. A wish is inherently retrospective: ‘I want’ has no psychoanalytic currency; only ‘I have always wanted’ can claim that. It resembles the Big Bang paradox in that the pre-lapsarian

world lacked all temporal attributes so could not have been a state of ‘pre-’ at all. The nature of time having been established as medium of wish-fulfilment, the prevailing object of wishing can be apprehended as occupying a mythic and impossible ‘absolute past’. The psyche is consigned to seeking out shadows of that object in the Platonic after-time that is real time, trusting that the anamnesic affect of such shadows will retain enough aura from the original to afford a modicum of fulfilment, or, more naively, taking the shadow for the real thing. Whence the compulsion to repeat and save time, to hearken back to the origin that is like a hologram.

Among the less naive of course, Freud’s contemporary Walter Benjamin will have said in another context that aura only fades with each (mechanical, but the psyche is also mechanical) reproduction.<sup>4</sup> He is speaking about the reproduction of works of art, but his co-religionist Theodor Adorno held opinions about repetition directed more specifically at psychoanalysis. The latter was one of a number of bêtes noires for Adorno, and precisely because he felt or feared psychoanalysis to be inimical to *thought* (and thus also to himself). In psychoanalysis, ‘ratio is degraded to rationalisation’, writes Adorno in the course of some astonishingly dyspeptic paragraphs in *Minima Moralia*.<sup>5</sup> Compared with the relatively magnanimous Aristotelian ‘moralia’ to which the title of his book cuttingly alludes, ethical life in the psychoanalytic domain is reduced to economic rationalisations that are part and parcel with ‘bourgeois self-alienation’. Exactly so: the paradigm of all social relations for the Freudian psyche is the infantile relation with the father. Any social life that gathers thereafter can at best dissimulate the filial competition that provides its deep structure and motive. It is just this dissimulating competitiveness and goal-seeking that lends social life its bourgeois and alienated character, Adorno rather maladroitly dismissing any notion of ‘sublimation’ which might make of such dissimulation a redeeming feature. If Freud says that the sublimation of Oedipal pressure produces society, Adorno retorts it is not worth having the bourgeois society that is produced, and against it he opposes the civilised society of ‘tact’ and good manners.

Characteristic of Adorno’s utopia is an authentic, dialectical quality in social relations, which means that they must be able to develop out of the crypto-primal state that Freud promises for them. The real time of Adorno is realer than the real time of Freud, so to speak, since the real time of Adorno contains dialectical, and we could even say musical, recapitulation and progression. These are the features of enlightenment, recapitulation implying listening to the other in a genuine social and ‘concernful’ manner, progression the cultivating effects of that openness

to learning and miscibility. Instancing Beethoven and Kant, Adorno will reach through to his fantasy of the ‘tactful’ society. He says that ‘there is a sense in which Beethoven’s regular recapitulations following dynamic explosions, Kant’s deduction of scholastic categories from the unity of consciousness, are eminently “tactful”’.<sup>6</sup> Regular recapitulations following dynamic explosions express the humanistic variety, the capacity for both social observance and individual endeavour, that are razed by the monotony and isolation of a Freudian pseudo-culture. The dialectical opportunity that tact brings with it encourages critical thought in the Kantian tradition, where cultivated speculation harmonises with a benign universal, and where ‘*Sapere aude!*’ can come into its own because such audacity will be both secured and respectfully admired by the society one lives in. Adorno’s bluster against psychoanalysis stems from a conviction that thought is naturally dialectical, that it takes place in a time making possible the dialectical difference that defines it. It demands the postulation of a real time, in other words, that is the possibility of advancement and change, of difference, of relation and of social relation in particular – the music of society. Politically that results in the well remarked-upon idiosyncrasy of Adorno’s position: it combines a squirearchical gentility with radical critique. Psychoanalysis on the other hand appears to circumscribe severely this possibility of change which is also the possibility of thought, arguing that change is little more than repetition disguised.

Headed ‘*This side of the pleasure principle*’, here is the major part of paragraph 37, from which ‘ratio is degraded to rationalisation’ was quoted:

The repressive traits in Freud have nothing to do with the want of human warmth that business-like revisionists point to in the strict theory of sexuality. Professional warmth, for the sake of profit, fabricates closeness and immediacy where people are worlds apart. It deceives its victim by affirming in his weakness the way of the world which made him so, and it wrongs him in the degree that it deviates from truth. If Freud was deficient in such human sympathy, he would in this at least be in the company of the critics of political economy, which is better than that of Tagore or Werfel. The fatality was rather that, in the teeth of bourgeois ideology, he tracked down conscious actions materialistically to their unconscious instinctual basis, but at the same time concurred with the bourgeois contempt for instinct which is itself a product of precisely the rationalisations he dismantled. He explicitly aligns himself, in the words of the *Introductory Lectures*, with the ‘general evaluation . . . which places social goals higher than the fundamentally selfish sexual ones’. As a specialist in psychology, he takes over the antithesis of social and egoistic, statically, without testing it. He no more discerns in it the work of repressive society than the trace of the disastrous mechanisms that he has himself described. Or rather, he vacillates, devoid of theory and swaying with

prejudice, between negating the renunciation of instinct as repression contrary to reality, and applauding it as sublimation beneficial to culture. In this contradiction something of the Janus-character of culture exists objectively, and no amount of praise for healthy sensuality can wish it away. In Freud, however, it leads to a devaluation of the critical standard that decides the goal of analysis. Freud's unenlightened enlightenment plays into the hands of bourgeois disillusion. As a late opponent of hypocrisy, he stands ambivalently between the desire for the open emancipation of the oppressed, and apology for open oppression. Reason is for him a mere superstructure, not – as official philosophy maintains – on account of his psychologism, which has penetrated deeply enough into the historical moment of truth, but rather because he rejects the end, remote to meaning, impervious to reason, which alone could provide the means, reason, to be reasonable: pleasure. Once this has been disparagingly consigned to the repertoire of tricks for preserving the species, and so itself exposed as a cunning form of reason, without consideration of that moment in pleasure which transcends subservience to nature, *ratio* is degraded to rationalisation [...]

It is the *alloyed* and Janus-like quality of psychoanalysis that is most vexatious. It provokes the oxymoronic flourish regarding 'Freud's unenlightened enlightenment', that epiphenomenon of bourgeois irresolution. The 'materialism' of psychoanalytic thinking – so far so good – has only gone so far, and as such realises in all its horror the latent recidivism of the Enlightenment accompanying it *ab ovo*, which Adorno theorises elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> The fatal mixedness of the Enlightenment programme has allowed to spawn upon it both the bourgeoisie and the fascism which is the tendency of the bourgeoisie – for the bourgeois all share the same goals, making them despicably uniform. 'The fatality was [...] that, in the teeth of bourgeois ideology, [Freud] tracked down conscious actions materialistically to their unconscious instinctual basis, *but at the same time* [my italics, but Adorno's exasperation is unmistakeable] concurred with the bourgeois contempt of instinct which is itself a product of precisely the rationalisations that he dismantled.' Instinct? It is clear that Adorno means instinct for pleasure – instinct *as* pleasure – which Freud has 'disparagingly consigned to the repertoire of tricks for preserving the species'. Instinct: by which Adorno signals something very different, not the pleasure reducible to phylogenetics, but that relaxed erotism of the social sphere, aesthetic cultivation, Periclean intercourse, the *philia* of the tactful society. In typical bourgeois fashion Freud has crushed all hope of such an ideal with his rebarbative contempt for instinct (though the ideal will be revived some years later by Roland Barthes). If only Freud could have seen that such contempt 'is itself a product of precisely the rationalisations that he dismantled'! Then he would have gone the whole way, and the Enlightenment might have grown up rid of its tendency to totalitarianism and the mechanisation of psycho-social

behaviour. It might have enjoyed the unambiguous efflorescence always meant for it.

But if we apply an Adornian filter to our view of Freud, that bourgeois world is just what people want, and the economically-driven state can only be the winner by it, for the psyche of its subjects is predisposed to economic competition and complicity in mass production as a form of repetition. Not only that but a state that assumes, as it can all too easily, the iconic power of the father will be practically unassailable. A state driven by social-political ideals such as Adorno's, on the other hand, will find the administration of such subjects far more problematic, since the generation of political interest and will goes against their post-Enlightenment natures and, since only education could be an effective means, it will be costly – a price presumably worth paying, even if Adorno wants to keep money and civilised culture quite separate. While thought implies society for Adorno, on account of its dialectical structure, it is to be differentiated sharply from the commerce implied in society.

This paradox constitutes something of a *topos*, the preservation of culture and thought from filthy lucre, though it may be possible to date it by looking at the Enlightenment from the other end, and from a quite different point of view. The Cambridge historian J. G. A. Pocock traces that *topos*, in Britain at any rate, to a Romantic reaction at the turn into the nineteenth century against the explosion of commercialisation in the century or so after 1688. And it is really on this last date that his gaze settles, seeing the Whig revolution as a profound transitional period that ushered in the Enlightenment. Our interest in this period is that Pocock argues, contra Adorno, for the strong bind yoking *together* commerce, speculation, 'thought' and the bourgeoisie. The Enlightenment is inconceivable apart from bourgeois eminence, so much so that the latter actually functions as a 'condition of possibility' for the former. At the same time, however, those texts which Pocock fastens upon, Hume, Gibbon, Smith, *inter alia*, classics of the Enlightenment, are written largely in reaction to this condition. That ambiguity typifies the age, and I shall first say something about it.

Pocock analyses the transition period in 'Britain' from the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries (I refer especially to his 1985 collection *Virtue, Commerce and History*).<sup>8</sup> 'Transition' is the operative word: in the post-Restoration world what fascinates Pocock is the transition from landed to mobile property which brings with it broadly a transition from, in terms Pocock grafts from Machiavelli, a 'virtuous' to a 'commercial' and even 'corrupt' social atmosphere – but 'social atmosphere' is also the result of the general transition, from the political to the same social. On one side of this transition then are landed property, virtue and

politics; on the other side mobile property, commerce, society and also the cultivation of ‘manners’. But the shift is not simple, and the interest of reading Pocock derives from his attention to the ambivalence as two sides of a transition continue to act upon one another, particularly as invoked in the texts of reaction which are already deplored the forked genesis of what would become known as the Enlightenment. In the figure of this ambivalence we as readers are observing a phenomenon that is at once radically and exclusively conceptual but dressed up in historical clothes; or perhaps psychological-political, but again dressed up in historical clothes; and thoroughly historical since the very concept of ‘manners’, for example, could have received its gestation nowhere else than in that very particular historical soil. The notion of a *persistence of transition*, in other words, is a very rich paradox. It could be said, but I shan’t elaborate on it, that Pocock’s own repetition compulsion is at play, in that the same ambivalence is targeted by him in diverse writings throughout the eighteenth century, thus calling into question what is meant by history in this fecund body of work. The transition is obviously so profound that it becomes the very form of political history, its terms as well as its object, in the British eighteenth century. If the two sides of the transition do continue to act upon one another then their more hospitable locus will be not history, which will tend to separate them across time, but the mental configuration of history that we call thought, permitting them to oscillate together. Pocock addresses works of political theory themselves from Locke to Burke – leading to an emphasis on ‘language’. As the introduction leaves little room for doubting, ‘language’ is the element of political history, but of course is also the medium where it is represented. Pocock’s method too is intrinsically confused with his object – an observation, not a criticism.

It was from Pocock’s book that the epigram, ‘history is public time’, was taken, from an essay entitled ‘Modes of Political and Historical Time in Early 18th Century England’. As Pocock would no doubt be surprised to learn (given the aspersions he casts towards it), the epigram agrees well with a psychoanalysis according to which the minimal predicate of time is the public exposure that attends upon the relation to the father in the Oedipal phase. That is when the child enters history, or rather when history begins for the child – that is, ‘public time’ is a tautology. Pocock goes on to distinguish public from social time, the former being institutional and the latter more generally discursive, though this need not detain us. In conformity with the methodological imbrication just noted, the essay, the most speculative in the volume, takes speculation itself as one of its themes. It detects an emergence of ‘speculation’ in the period originating in the establishing of the Bank of England in 1696

and more particularly in the institution of the National Debt. I quote two paragraphs in the course of which Pocock does not balk at using the language of wish-fulfilment himself:

The National Debt was a device permitting English society to maintain and expand its government, army and trade by mortgaging its revenues in the future. This was sufficient to make it the paradigm of a society now living to an increasing degree by speculation and by credit: that is to say, by men's expectations of one another's capacity for future action and performance. Since a credit mechanism was an expansive and dynamic social device, the beliefs men had to form and maintain concerning one another were more than simple expectations of another's capacity to pay what he had borrowed, to perform what he had promised; they were boomtime beliefs, obliging men to credit one another with capacity to expand and grow and become what they were not. Far more than the practice of trade and profit, even at their most speculative, the growth of public credit obliged capitalist society to develop as an ideology something society had never possessed before, the image of a secular and historical future. Without belief in the progress of the arts, the investing mercantile society literally could not maintain itself.

But in what was belief in such a future to be rooted? Not in experience, since there is no way of experiencing a future; not in reason, since reason based on the perception of nature cannot well predict the exercise of capacities that have not yet been developed; not in Christian faith, since the most apocalyptic of prophecies is not concerned to reveal the future state of the market. There remained imagination, fantasy or passion; and Augustan social thought is visibly obsessed at times by the spectacle of a society advancing at high speed into a world it can only imagine as existing in the forms which it may desire. Not only must the speculative society maintain and govern itself by perpetually gambling on its own wish-fulfilments; a new dimension was added to that dependence of all men upon all men which thinkers in the classical tradition wished desperately to avoid – though Christian and Hobbesian thinkers alike rather welcomed it – by the imminence of a state of affairs in which not only was every man in debt to every other man, but every man was judged and governed, at every moment, by other men's opinion of the probability that not he alone, but generations yet unborn, would be able and willing to repay their debts at some future date which might never even arrive. Men, it seemed, were governed by opinion, and by opinion as to whether certain governing fantasies would ever become realised.<sup>9</sup>

That reference to probability is interesting not least because one could add it to the dossier of debate surrounding Ian Hacking's *The Taming of Chance*.<sup>10</sup> Hacking traces to the same period the emergence of probability theory, wondering *why* it emerged only then, given that the mathematical resources to generate it had long been available. Pocock's brilliant speculation gives the germ of an answer, arguing for the near simultaneous nativity of psychological and economic imagination, though the economic fact (the

National Debt) just has the edge and so subdues the passion that would make Pocock himself an old-fashioned Spirit of the Age historian. And in the next but one paragraph Pocock cites Defoe the conjunction of whose economic and literary interests as one of the new breed of men of letters incites us to extend the speculation further still: to the novel which, along with other novelties, newsbooks and newspapers, is ‘rising’ at the time. A novel borrows from the future in the sense of the realm experienced in the imagining of contingencies: fiction never pays but is rather, at least in principle, the pure expenditure of imagination, structurally has to be *credited*, believed, extended a kind of imaginistic overdraft. The speculative spirit spreads through the National Debt, capitalist imagination, probability theory, novelistic fiction – and the arbitrariness of making the one cause of all the others becomes disconcertingly pressing. The rampancy of this network might be called ‘hysterical’ by Pocock: the early eighteenth century (which by projective identification now includes himself) must devote energy to keeping the ‘hysteria’ of speculation balanced by the cultivation of Opinion, ‘what Montesquieu was later to describe as the conversion of *crédit* into *confiance*’.<sup>11</sup> This constitutes a second ambivalence then, the dialectic of Enlightenment tilting between opinion and hysteria, reason and imagination, empirical and transcendental.

Time is public time (public because credit is so by definition) and again its chief quality is delay. The delay by which payment of debt is deferred, time is the ‘never-never’, literally, to use the colloquial phrase for buying on credit. It is conducive to imagination and speculation, though thought proper – works of intellectual bearing, the texts Pocock rereads – is the dialectical capacity to consider imagination and reason in dialectical combination, and is therefore at one with polity as the tempering of bourgeois hysteria or credit-inflation; after all, it shortens the speculative delay, contracts it, bringing thought closer to ‘real’ action. Time is the suspension of real time, of the real as what comes home to roost, as the calling in of a debt; the suspension gives buoyancy across the board culturally, as prospecting for capital is secured by the future archive that is credit. It is worth noting how at odds with a Weberian notion of capital generation this schema is, and not just on the grounds that Pocock appears to allow all religious feeling simply to evaporate after the Civil War. Capital accumulation is the result for Weber of a precisely counter-speculative ethos, that of the Protestant whose wealth is merely the by-product, and yet the commendable evidence, of industry and abstemiousness united. Speculation arises as a temptation glinting back at you from the hard-won pile, and Weber will aptly quote John Wesley on that dangerous supplement.<sup>12</sup> He would have found Pocock’s ‘capitalist imagination’ quite contradictory.

From what we have seen of him Adorno would be bound to concur, but then his political sympathies are manifestly remote from Pocock's, he is interested more in the fate than the origin of the Enlightenment, and in any case what they each denote by that term is divergent to say the least. Yet for both men thought is an enlightened, social and dialectical activity, fostered by 'transitions', even if Pocock attributes what would have been too much of its phenomenon, for Adorno's liking, to bourgeois venture. Without such venture Enlightenment thought would not have been the ambivalent thing so choice for intellectual perusal, for Pocock for Adorno the Enlightenment could have been so much more enlightened without it – look at psychoanalysis, for instance, that unconscionable hybrid of regressive bourgeois thinking and promising quasi-Marxist insight – though one wonders how much of its dialectical quality would have been removed in the removal of the ambivalence.

I would like to run this excursus a little further before coming back to more recognisably psychoanalytic questions. Economic attention, the enjoinder to expediency or contingency-as-necessity, sets the environment of the psychoanalytic subject, and to that degree it is right to 'speculate' in an economic vein about it. It is not certain that thought – that consciousness as sceptical apprehension in a perhaps Cartesian mode – is not supplementary to such a subject's economy, though we should concede the bad logic of this: economy is already supplementary, being the structure that develops around the Oedipal fact that to go forward one must first go back, that the psycho-social 'sphere' must be a circle. Consciousness is the consciousness only of this supplementarity, indeed of this speculation, while the unconscious keeps the wishes in reserve until that supplementarity which sublimates them is gone through – except during patches of thinner vigilance, like slips of the tongue, when the wish in the form of a symptom momentarily darkens conscious time, or more generally when that vigilance is actively encouraged to decontract in the course of a session. (That suggests conversely that in the unconscious, like in a black hole, time has no dimension, and this might explain why narrative time in dreams appears instantaneous and why somatic stimuli can trigger an extended dream sequence in the twinkling of an eye. (See Chapter 7 below, 'The Rest of Radioactive Light', for a discussion of this.) What interests about Adorno and Pocock, miles apart though they be in other respects, is that both posit two types of thought measurable in relation to the economy of supplements. There is bourgeois thought and there is dialectical thought. Bourgeois thought, for Pocock, thrives under conditions of credit-boom, as speculation. To take up Pocock's 'language' thesis rather more absurdly than he may condone: it thrives under the semantic richesse (ambivalence again) of the

term ‘speculation’ as it gestures simultaneously to mind and to market; it is thoroughly bound into economic factors, and so is not quite ‘thought’, in fact. Adorno sees the same bond between bourgeois thought and the economy but chooses to be ulcered by it: calling this kind of rationalisation ‘speculation’ and by extension ‘imagination’ is merely to indulge it. Genuine thought as *ratio* arises only as, curiously enough, something extra to such a supplementary economy – as what Derrida will call a ‘gift’, something you get ‘into the bargain’.<sup>13</sup> Only when the parsimony of the market has been exceeded can dialectical thought appear as precisely the quasi-aesthetic excess of society over economy. Though at a remove from the market, dialectical thought for both Pocock and Adorno has actually more reality to it. By which it is meant not only that thought is more quintessentially itself, but that it partakes of the real in a more necessary way: in Pocock, precisely because political-intellectual thought abbreviates the social time which has turned into time-as-fantasy; in Adorno, because the dialectic of thought is intrinsically social and ‘real’. On the other hand, such a dialecticity, set forth as it is by temporal difference and cultural progress, could hardly be more antithetical to the dialecticity of thought of Pocock’s thinkers, which is a reactive fixing of time in plumb configurings, tinged with nostalgia.

Which is partly in the nature of a more conservative thinker. It can’t be deemed an intellectual fault, then, that the fantasy-time of credit and commerce described by Pocock, so generative of the new, cannot help but seem at once a description of Pocock’s own economic times. And the attitude towards it – in this case, it is Pocock embodying it – has endured too, more importantly. It is an attitude concerned to maintain equilibrium, to resist the futures-market and futurity *per se*, by, for example, moderating the bourgeois commercial hysteria prone to the transcendental illusion that it can get along without any empirical anchoring by polity (= thought). Put paradoxically, real time for Pocock is time which, by suppressing futurity, does not change over time, is not temporal. This produces a particularly acute double bind for the historian whose subject is change over time. When the reduction of excitation at stake I obviously want to evoke the terms of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, such that writing history itself – in its more ‘conservative’ forms, to draw on all the nuances of this word – can be viewed as a form of credit control, the counter-inflationary policy that has a pathogenesis in keeping the psyche cool. Bourgeois commercialism threatens the albeit ambiguous stasis (ambiguous because the commercialism has to be there in order to be moderated in order to reach stasis . . .). Since in a sense we are talking about the very difference between thought on the Right and thought on the Left, we might be tempted to set Adorno

up on the other side of this attitude, saying that for him it was advancement not stasis that was desirable, but we would be deceived: dialectical change affords the medium for equilibrium. For Adorno advancement is generous equilibrium; as enlightened progress, *ratio* is certainly not rationalisation, but it is *rationality* – proportion, conceived by him in socio-musical time. *Equilibrium* presents itself as the fantasy of dialectical thought. Bourgeois commercialism, liberal capitalism, may be up to a point necessary to achieving that equilibrium, but the stronger reaction to it is the will to its control – a reaction proper to genuine thought.

The curious thing is that in a now classic debate liberal capitalism has been reframed to answer all by itself just those desiderata of stasis, and so at the expense of dialectics *tout court*. We have come to love Big Brother. I am referring to the debate surrounding Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, notably as voiced by Perry Anderson in his own essay, 'The Ends of History'.<sup>14</sup> Anderson relays Fukuyama's thesis that:

After the gigantic conflicts of the twentieth century, 'the unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism' over all competitors means 'not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period in history, but the end of history as such: that is the end-point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government'.<sup>15</sup>

Such flagrant contentiousness will of course not go uncontended, and Anderson reserves his own criticisms until later in the essay. Meanwhile he is content to report the torpedoings of others, for example the 'chorus of disapproval at the very idea of a historical conclusion, whatever its character':

The great majority of Fukuyama's commentators in the world's press greeted his argument with incredulity – after all, do not common sense and daily news tell us that there are always fresh and unexpected events, and even that their pace is exponentially quickening, as the sensational close of the decade demonstrates?

But this response is a 'non-sequitur':

Fukuyama's case allows for any number of further empirical events, as he has pointed out: it simply contends that there is a set of structural limits within which they will now unfold, that has been reached within the OECD zone. Kojève [Anderson picks up a thread from earlier in the essay] replied to this objection in his time, with characteristic vigour: the movement of history was accelerating more and more, but it was advancing less and less – all that was happening was 'the alignment of the provinces'.

The end of history is the stasis of liberal capitalism as practised by democracies in the OECD zone. History itself was a stage on the way to it, and if there are other parts of the world where stasis has not yet been attained it is because they are still trapped within the historical phase that is evidenced pre-eminently by belligerence and revolution. Now it is only a question of “the alignment of [these] provinces”.

As Anderson reminds us, ‘the great change that has inspired this version [for it belongs to a tradition] of the end of history is, of course, the collapse of communism’.<sup>16</sup> The globe will gradually come round as a whole to post-history, having shaken all dialecticity off itself, in a kind of quiescent irredentism. The innovative element within this thesis is that liberal capitalism will have gained a critical level where it can stave itself in, round itself off. Innovative because the creation of capital is usually perceived to be ‘exponential’, precisely, speculative, creating more of itself out of itself, with an expansionism as its common corollary. That is the quality highlighted by Pocock, and by Weber for that matter, in their very different idioms. For Pocock, speaking through Gibbon, the urge of a successfully commercial state is empire (another factor dragging it further off course from civic republicanism in all its virtue), whereby capital transplants itself abroad, as did ‘Britain’ in America in the eighteenth century. How to manage this inevitable outcrop, as it were, comes to preoccupy polity all too much and is likely to corrupt it. Which is a secular version of Weber’s Protestant capitalism. Yes. Profit must be ‘ploughed back’ into the enterprise, in a phrase appropriately evocative of *Proverbs*. Only then can increase of capital be a means of magnifying God; otherwise it is external, wasteful, scatological, diabolical, sinful, etc. – ‘corrupting’. The point is that, as in the Frankenstein myth, the desired excess, the creature of industry, transmogrifies into a burden. Fukuyama shows no such anxiety, but mainly because, one supposes, there is nowhere left for capital to take itself to become monstrous, the profits of it will de facto be ‘contained’ for it has felt out the very limits of the world. The world-as-corporation may magnify itself in paradoxically unchanging form, pulsating, effectively functioning as God. All parts have been touched by its rhetorical hand even if some still have unfinished historical business to get through before they can answer its irresistible call to passivity.

A thousand and one objections could still be made to Fukuyama, and Perry Anderson presents an intimidating suite of them, but we want to pursue an alternative agenda. Here we have a version of economy that is no longer temporal-historical, an on the face of it strictly unthinkable proposition to psychoanalysis. It shouldn’t be called economy at all, all historicism – the dialecticity of time, and ultimately historical

consciousness too – having been effaced from it in its sublimity. Time remains, but has been released from carrying the charge of volition and desire. Its quality of delay therefore makes no sense any more, and a perpetual present penetrates and floods it instead. An immediate fit between wanting and having elides the difference between them, rendering the psychoanalytic subject a theoretic impossibility. That elision must also sublate the distinction between private and public, for that was produced by the exigency upon wish-fulfilment to ‘go round the houses’, that is, finding a socially acceptable way of gratifying itself. Radically, *radically democratic* subjects will populate the world in the sense that privacy as a meaningful limit to universality will have vanished.

Slavoj Žižek would relish this scene. In a slightly altered form, he has written about it.<sup>17</sup> The not-so-futuristic state is exemplified by a film like *Blade Runner* where the global Corporation owns everything, down to one’s memories. Consequently, these cannot be told apart from products; one’s very psyche might be corporately manufactured and the difference between humans and androids becomes a nice point. Again it is a thoroughly Platonic eventuality, termed *anamnesis*, this remembering of what has never been subjectively experienced. The memories have been planted there by the transcendental law. A lateral interpretation might be that a truth about memory has been expressed. Namely, that it is always possible for memory to be expropriated, and cannot be uniquely owned. After all, it is possible to remember after one’s turn the memories of another, just as it is possible to memorise fiction – which in principle departs from the *vécu*. Memory is appended to provide the pathos that defined human beings in the historical phase of the world. Human beings *are* this pathos, are this capacity for remembering and forgetting, are, rather, the defectiveness of subjective memorising. The defectiveness is masterfully supplanted by the liberal capitalist technocracy, but then put back into the system to simulate its humanity. In the states envisioned by both Žižek and Fukuyama, memory can then exist apart from experience, just as time continues though no longer receptive to history – always possible, for an expropriatory alterity laminates memory *de jure*, its removability defines it even as it seemed the most inalienably personal faculty a human could have had. The psyche has been invaginated out onto this irenic plateau of conformism which ought by rights to bleach it of all distinctive features but in fact tolerates an amount of confected ‘individuality’. Why? Presumably as the condition under which the universal society can bind ‘volitionally’ with a semblance at least of coming together and thus retain its dumb telos rather than existing as a mere aggregate. A techno-Hegelianism has achieved its climax, technology having supervened upon Spirit as the world’s

immanent Notion while being infinitely capable, since it is technological and nothing but, of mocking-up the teleological repletion of Spirit as it chooses. Techno-commerce differs from human, pathetic economic commerce, and has split off from it.

Scintillating a scenario though this is, its typology is somewhat banal in that the old humanist opposition between human and technical has been left intact. It reveals by hindsight that the Enlightenment operates principally as an ideal of being able to determine itself by limiting its own commercially led technological and scientific thrust, thought being that agency that would harness it to the properly defective, the human, the potential for memory that would keep thought's selective dialecticity alive. Memory must be kept just ahead of science; knowledge explodes when technology surpasses it. Perfectibilian thinking makes sense only against the background of implicit imperfection.

But the human economy, though based on the desire to fulfil wishes and return, and thus deeply moved by memory, as a fact will have induced amnesia: that is sublimation. Wishes go underground. It is only by forgetting that I can get on with living. While the antithesis human/technical has been let lie, even though within it 'human' shrinks to a reference point rather than presenting substantial autotelic opposition, the contrast between the pathos economy of human memory and the Fukuyaman-Žižekian world has less resolution to it than at first sight appears. The 'real' time wherein I get on with my life is just as shallow as the history-repellent time of *post-histoire*. The experiences I have in it, the memories I accrue and the lacunae within or around them are merely the code of ersatz subjectivity that can be translated back into the general legend that is the structure of the psyche. To me it looks like my history, but that is because the memory-economy I am in has forged me in the only form it knows, that of subjectivity. The history is tacit structure. That structure expresses itself in time because temporality inheres in it as delay, as we have seen (the Oedipal phase), not because of any claim over it made by historical phenomenology. The pathos lies in the fact that the subjects who emerge into time from the temporalisation of that structure are bound, because they are subjects (because they now embody the energetic symbiosis of unconscious and conscious), to interpret time as history, that is, the opportunity for memory, humanity, self-expression. And it *is history*, everything we know by that name. It's just that its basis is rather more contorted than usually granted, for its basis is time, which co-extends with it but which originates in a structural vortex that has not yet recognised the possibility of an individual and subjective psyche since 'psyche' only refers to an implacable law. This is the law of deferral, competition or economy,

of which psychological subjectivity is merely an effect. We can say with equal justification that there is real progress in history and that there is not, that it is as equally life as death. We can also say that any subjective assumption through memory of one's own experiences is just as derivative as in the future-state, for an expropriative, generalising, structural power begets and conditions it.

*Subjectively* speaking, then, time is history – with all its pathos of commercial-psychological economism, the suffering of negotiation, fortune. Or, subjectivity is the misprision that time is absorbed by history *in toto*, similar to Paul de Man's presentation of subjectivity as what mistakes linguistic, tropological time for the anthropomorphism of history or genetic time (an overestimation of the object, even, to adapt Freud's notation for love). And because memory belongs in with this primary subjectal illusion, thought opens up as well. As sceptical apprehension (our working definition), thought depends on memory as upon its own predicate. For scepticism is not innocence, and relies on knowing something already. One cannot think sceptically without a degree of memory; equally, memory is a constitutive feature of subjectivity. So thought and subjectivity go hand and hand, just as thought fades away in the subject-less realm of the future-state. Can one imagine a theory of thought, an epistemology, that was not at the same time a formula of 'the subject'?

In other words, the psychoanalytic subject certainly does think, it thinks *because it is* a subject, and it thinks *as* a subject, which is to say in relation to its 'own' past no matter how recent or remote: we should say in relation to itself as related to a particular anteriority taken for its own. There is always some minimal attestation of experience, and a minimal part of thinking is its echo. In this way, through thought-as-memory, the subject perceives itself as individual or having some considerable insularity, living as it does in the channel of its 'own' experience. Even though it is 'wrong' to do so from a structural point of view, the subject is bound to believe in its own individuality, its subjectivity, and thinking primarily is the form of this constitutive belief. The subject exists as a limit; its subjectivity implies experience as limited to a particular form, *finite* experience. We would have no conception of time if we did not also have that of finitude; from a psychoanalytic viewpoint this finitude describes the contours of a private history of desire, memory as it is retained regulatively within the economy of negotiation, that is bargaining for what we want.

We have now encroached again on the ground whereon thinking and death hold each other in relation. Must not thinking as the subject's experience of its own limit be an intimation of mortality? Well, no:

there is no reason to associate the limitation to subjectivity with the limitation of the subject. On the other hand, the continuous anteriority that shadows all thinking restrains the latter to a necessary regression or ‘recidivism’, to use Adorno’s word again, and for Freud regressiveness is the very meaning of death – the *return* to a simple state. Death comes first, it pre-dates life. For mortals, the absolute past or ‘past before the past’ is what lies ahead. The movement of life is archaeological, or archaeo-teleo-logical to be precise. Since this is also the movement of psychoanalysis as a technique whose goal is the retrieval of the lost archic code (of the psyche), there is some justification for saying that in theorising the death-drive psychoanalysis is theorising itself, and through what it itself would call an identification of some kind. For the subject this movement backwards involves a transition from the finitude of its own subjectivity back to infinity, its dissolution or rather its *generalisation*, the cessation of respect for its speciality. Its finitude means that it will not always be finite, or that its finitude will be finished. And by a peculiarly metacritical logic, this means in turn that the subject will become thinkable again to psychoanalysis, as a phenomenon with attributes susceptible of generalisation. Psychoanalysis can think about the subject only on condition that it be a subject that will die like all others. Mortality would be the subject’s promise to leave its specificity behind, to return into the archaeological general origin, and it is on the basis of this promise that psychoanalysis can ‘think’ the subject.

How do these things tie up with the notion we began with, of thinking as risk-averse repetition? In the economy it participates in (there can be no non-participation), the subject will have occasionally to take risks to get what it wants, and for no other reason than that it is in an economy: for economy implies some diminution of personal control and therefore the presence of ‘chance’. Economy is a risk environment for the subject. Up to a point such an economy could be contrasted with the achieved economy of Fukuyama in which the anxieties of risk are allayed simply because the economy provides – which, again, barely makes it an economy at all, if economy is, as surely it must be, a form which *can always fail* to provide. Beyond such a point, however, the two types of economy merge again where psychoanalytic subjects can be seen to derive from quite anonymous principles of temporal delay (derived in their turn from the general premise of wish-fulfilment).

Absolute inertia is not an option for the subject which exists only as an economic form. Some life, some risk, some calculation is incumbent upon it. Some thought as the retention of desire must fill at least a part of it, and such thought forms the link with the death which the subject harps back to. Thought necessarily suggests living calculation,

the appraisal of opportunity, the estimation of values, all as forms of ‘life’ – it has its origin in economics (as the epigraph from Nietzsche proposes). But this living risk environment, that of the (by definition) never omniscient subject, is at once nothing but a tension with the death it has pulled away from in order to return to. Death is the realm of no risk (no life). And life is quite literally tension, that is the apperception of risk, which makes subjective living an *essentially* anxious activity – this is a statement quite proper to psychoanalysis throughout its ‘development’ as a theory. Whether or not we are compelled to repeat behaviour neurotically later on in life, and whether or not our later thoughts tolerate being translated back into their infantile adumbrations, there exists beforehand a prior link that puts thinking into a necessary relation with death. That is the very meaning of subjectivity. Worse still, the memories that subjects hold as earnests of their individuality themselves hail from a deathly anonymity: the privacy of memory can in principle be deprived from the subject and individualities traversed by a general law (a ‘law of genre’, as Derrida would call it) which formally matches the concept of death as I have entertained it in the course of this chapter.

## Notes

1. ‘The Dream-Work does not Think’, trans. Mary Lydon, in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 19–55.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (collected with *Ecce Homo*) (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 3rd essay, § 17, p. 131.
3. See Chapter 6 below, ‘A Harmless Suggestion’, for elaboration of this point.
4. Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 217–51.
5. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978), § 37, p. 61.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
7. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, with Max Horkheimer, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979).
8. J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 98–9.
10. Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). As for the debate I refer specifically to Robert Newsom’s *A Likely Story: Probability and Play in Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 1988).
11. J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 99.

12. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 175: “I fear, wherever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore I do not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and the love of the world in all its branches.”
13. From among many possible references I choose Derrida’s ‘Donner la mort’, in *L’éthique du don: Jacques Derrida et la pensée du don* (Colloque de Royaumont, December 1990) (Paris: Métailié-Transition, 1992), pp. 11–108.
14. Perry Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement* (London and New York: Verso, 1992), pp. 279–375.
15. Ibid., p. 333.
16. Ibid., p. 332.
17. See chapter 1 of *Tarrying with the Negative* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

# A Subject is Being Beaten

The half-hearted attempts at suicide that he kept making were not really serious; it was not so much a desire for death – death held for him neither peace nor hope – but rather the attempt, at moments of extreme terror or a vacant stillness close to un-being, to restore his equilibrium through physical pain. (Georg Büchner, *Lenz*)

If, according to Freud, the subject pursues its own death, or is steered towards it by a drive for inertia, why not say suicide and masochism lie at the heart of life? Is not *suicide* the ‘telos’ of being human, and why does Freud jib at the idea?

My title picks up on Freud’s 1919 paper, ‘A Child Is Being Beaten’. Freud’s title in turn quotes a phrase – one reiterated by several patients in relating their ‘beating-phantasies’. These phantasies typically progress through three phases, it being the second phase that counts:

This first phase of the beating-phantasy is . . . completely represented by the phrase: ‘*My father is beating the child.*’ I am betraying a great deal of what is to be brought forward later when instead of this I say: ‘*My father is beating the child whom I hate.*’ Moreover, one may hesitate to say whether the characteristics of a ‘phantasy’ can yet be ascribed to this first step towards the later beating-phantasy. It is perhaps rather a question of recollections of events which have been witnessed, or of desires which have arisen on various occasions. But these doubts are of no importance.

Profound transformations have taken place between this first phase and the next. It is true that the person beating remains the same (that is, the father); but the child who is beaten has been changed into another one and is now invariably the child producing the phantasy. The phantasy is accompanied by a high degree of pleasure, and has now acquired a significant content, with the origin of which we shall be concerned later. Now, therefore, the wording runs: ‘*I am being beaten by my father.*’ It is of an unmistakably masochistic character.

This second phase is the most important and the most momentous of all. But we may say of it in a certain sense that it has never had a real existence.

It is never remembered, it has never succeeded in becoming conscious. It is a construction of analysis, but it is no less a necessity on that account.

The third phase once more resembles the first . . .<sup>1</sup>

The second phase of the beating-phantasy presents clinically as masochism. It may never have had a real existence, Freud says, but that in no wise weakens its force. It may be more real for its very unavailability to empirical observation, less negotiable, more indomitable, more decisive, impossible to combat – an ideal origin, held like an image in the air. The power of ‘phantasy’ may lie in just such insubstantiality. It carries the power of structuring the psyche without ever being present as conscious.

How does it come into being, upon what materials does this ‘construction of analysis’ draw? Freud writes:

This being beaten is now a convergence of the sense of guilt and sexual love. *It is not only the punishment for the forbidden genital relation [with the father], but also the regressive substitute for that relation*, and from this latter source it derives the libidinal excitation which is from this time forward attached to it, and which finds its outlet in masturbatory acts. Here for the first time we have the essence of masochism.<sup>2</sup>

This ‘essence of masochism’ has two components: the sense of guilt and sexual love. The sense of guilt acts upon libidinal energy as, however, only one of two agencies capable of directing it. Sadism is the other: it thrusts the same energy aggressively outward and, to the extent it may be ‘transformed’ by masochism, implying its precedence, constitutes a comparatively regressive state. Freud says ‘the transformation of sadism into masochism appears to be due to the influence of the sense of guilt which takes part in the act of repression’, making of masochism the relatively civilised phenomenon. The essence of masochism arises from the less regressive of two modalities acting upon sexual love, with a suggestion that even masochism will have first to pass through sadism in order to transform it. In the case of beating-phantasies, less a forking path taken by sexual love – either sadism or masochism – than a single path beckons, the first steps upon which will always be sadistic even if progress to masochism may later be made. I say ‘later’ though one cannot unproblematically assume a sequence in time for such ‘events’. One encounters a theoretic as much as a genetic typology, and the relationship between them here, as throughout the writings of Freud, demands an analysis all its own.

With such theoretic information it should be possible to plot the longitude of masochism, as it were, against the latitude of suicide. Is suicide

on a continuum with masochism psychoanalytically understood? As aggressive, perhaps mutant species of the genus self-relation, how do suicide and masochism compare? There is no positive information I shall advance of the type: suicide may be an accidental result of masochism when it goes too far. Rather than offering sociological analysis, I want to uncover conceptual foundations. Because if one multiplies suicide and masochism together, at least using Freud's notations, one ends up with neither an 'abnormality' nor a 'perversity' but even with the 'essence' of what it is to be a human being.

A year after the paper on beating-phantasies, Freud was to publish a metapsychological account of pleasure at once very close and very far from the spirit of '*A Child Is Being Beaten*'. Very close because again pleasure manifests itself in its 'opposite' form, something at first sight destructive to the psyche, pain affording pleasure through masochism in the earlier paper and through nothing less than death in the later; very far precisely because the 'metapsychological' and speculative atmosphere of the later paper makes it quite distinct from the more 'scientific' tenor of '*A Child is Being Beaten*'.

As we know from previous chapters, the notorious hypothesis of the later paper, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle',<sup>3</sup> was that the 'self-preservative sexual instincts' are identical with the death instincts to the extent the latter are, paradoxically, 'self-preservative' too. A necessary, if perhaps not sufficient, link exists between pleasure and death, with Freud hovering in the gap between this sufficiency and that necessity. Death furnishes the goal of life in general, for life in general takes the form of the pursuit of pleasure, and pleasure results from the quietening of tension to the point of surcease, the second self of death from which theoretically and practically it cannot be isolated. Put at its most tautologous: life, that is pleasure, seeks death, that is pleasure, that is life. The tautology (or heterotautology, if we can attribute to this sameness-in-difference a character akin to the play of identity in the dialectic of Hegel) not only confounds distinctions, it also obliterates the notion of seeking a goal, for no goal different from that which seeks it may be discerned, be it pleasure, life or death. In almost Nietzschean fashion a logic of identity gives way to a 'logic' of force, desire, energy. A living thing seeks death as an 'object' no longer outside itself, and thus may 'seek' it only blindly, becoming itself or fulfilling its ontological mission in the destruction of its ontic status, gathering itself into suicidal self-coincidence. Suicide, which Freud does not name in the 1920 paper, would be the general tendency of living things. And suicide, as what serves pleasure at the risk of damage, would be no less formally related to masochism than death to pleasure.

However, suicide would annul once and for all the possibility of seeking pleasure, that is death. If pleasure, death and life somehow interfuse to the point of identity (if that is the word for it), and yet Freud does not admit suicide alongside them, it may be because suicide would make too explicit the effect of that interfusion, namely the collapse of goal-seeking *per se*, to which we just referred. Suicide is that act which abolishes the tendency that prompts it. This would undermine the whole theoretical edifice of psychoanalysis, the founding tenet of which I take to be wish-fulfilment (which is goal-seeking).

Another reason for Freud's non-connection of suicide and masochism at this point may again be a matter of genre. That is to say, the account of pleasure in masochism is 'genetic', while that of the pleasure inscribed in the death instincts is 'structural'. Even though Freud, we recall, has written:

This second phase is the most important and the most momentous of all. But we may say of it in a certain sense that it has never had a real existence. It is never remembered, it has never succeeded in becoming conscious. It is a construction of analysis, but it is no less a necessity on that account.

– nonetheless, the pleasure at issue coordinates with a real phase that did not take place, as it were, in the patient's life, whereas the pleasure coeval with the death instincts pervades all of life considered as more or less than, but in any case irreducible to, the phases articulating it.

Finally, Freud is by and large too committed to the value of sublimation to deem suicide much more than a regrettable failure of social adaptation. Where masochism can be closely related to sublimation as a 'civilised' phenomenon, so to speak, one that bears guilt and therefore social apprehension within it, suicide severs once and for all the social relation to others.

Freud had in fact already provided an account of suicide, in a third paper, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917). And reading back from the account of sadism and masochism in 'A Child is Being Beaten' we can see suicide in all its sadistic regressiveness, its failure of sociality. Freud writes, 'It is this sadism alone that solves the riddle of the tendency to suicide . . .'. He goes on:

So immense is the ego's self-love, which we have come to recognise as the primal state from which instinctual life proceeds, and so vast is the amount of narcissistic libido which we see liberated in the fear that emerges at a threat to life, that we cannot conceive how that ego can consent to its own destruction. We have long known, it is true, that no neurotic harbours thoughts of suicide which he has not turned back upon himself from murderous impulses

against others, but we have never been able to explain what interplay of forces can carry such a purpose through to execution.<sup>4</sup>

Up to now (the 1917 analysis of melancholia) suicide has been a psychoanalytic riddle. But now:

The analysis of melancholia now shows that the ego can kill itself only if, owing to the return of the object-cathexis, it can treat itself as an object – if it is able to direct against itself the hostility which relates to an object and which represents the ego's original reaction to objects in the external world. Thus in regression from narcissistic object-choice the object has, it is true, been got rid of, but it has nevertheless proved more powerful than the ego itself.<sup>5</sup>

Objects? We recall that sadism is the exteriorising, masochism the interiorising, process. The suicidal person sadistically treats the self as an object towards which aggression can be directed. In effect no 'self' is involved and suicide, strangely enough, is anything but a form of self-relation. This has to be the case, for the ego would never destroy itself, 'so immense is [its] self-love'. What the suicide kills is not the self at all, but an other, an 'object', a representation of the external world, played by the self. *Suicide*, purely speaking, remains psychoanalytically impossible. The act of self-murder is a regressive act of sadism performed 'mistakenly' on the self, an act in which the bullet was meant for someone else, someone in the past, but an act whereby a distorting anachronism and moment of delegation puts to death the one who holds it.

But, one might ask, if the ego's self-love really is so immense, how is it the death instincts can ever vie with it, especially as such instincts are not to be conflated with, and thus cannot profit from the aggression in, the sadism fuelling suicide? The death instincts have no assignable place in the genetic typology that passes through sadism, meaning they have no skill in 'objectifying' the self (on the contrary!) – they cannot set it up as a target; they belong to no 'phase', they constitute the psyche as such – and insofar as they do have this constitutive power, they of course can rival the structurally embedded self-love of the ego. But what differentiates the death borne by the death instincts and that borne by suicide?

If there is an answer to this question, it probably lies in the ambiguity with which Freud describes the death instincts. For whereas suicide entails 'destruction', the death instincts fixate on preservation – on preserving the psyche at zero level, composing 'death' as an atavistic and ultimately simple state. Two kinds of death present themselves.

Six years later, by the time of 'The Ego and the Id' (1923), Freud has amalgamated them. He does so by bringing both under the rubric of

the superego. Able to draw upon the earlier work on melancholia, but dispensing with the vocabulary of ‘objects’, Freud can synthesise an answer to the following question: ‘How is it that the superego manifests itself essentially as a sense of guilt . . . and moreover develops such extraordinary harshness and severity towards the ego?’ The answer:

If we turn to melancholia first, we find that the excessively strong super-ego which has obtained a hold upon consciousness rages against the ego with merciless violence, as if it had taken possession of the whole of the sadism available in the person concerned. Following our view of sadism, we should say that the destructive component had entrenched itself in the super-ego and turned against the ego. What is now holding sway in the super-ego is, as it were, a pure culture of the death instinct, and in fact it often enough succeeds in driving the ego into death, if the latter does not fend off its tyrant in time by the change round into mania.<sup>6</sup>

In this case, that of melancholia – a case which ‘often enough’ ends in the death of the ego at the hands of the superego and which, therefore, we may legitimately call suicidal – the superego will have availed itself of all the sadism to be had in the person concerned, despite the fact that sadism is far less socially educated than masochism and so goes against the grain to some extent of superegoic functioning. Being so sadistic, the superego by definition will not, then, have advanced to masochism (suicide is a sadistic and not a masochistic act – it’s just that the sadism has backfired on its perpetrator) and so must forfeit the pleasure masochism brings. Yet this does not prevent Freud from squaring it off with the essentially pleasure-driven death instincts. Indeed, ‘the superego is, as it were, a pure culture of the death instinct’, even though it must have fought shy of pleasure (at least as produced by masochism) and be finding the hedonism of the death instincts alien to it. Moreover, Freud’s metaphor of the ‘pure culture of the death instinct’ sublates the difference between the deaths envisaged by suicide on the one hand and the death instincts on the other.

There remains also the question of who kills whom in cases of suicide. For Freud, an excessive superegoism leads to the death of the ego which symbiotically kills off the superego with it. Insofar as the superego exists in the realm of representations, its ‘whoness’ must be fluid. The superego, in theory the most socialised, civilised aspect of the psyche, nevertheless may, under suicidal conditions, become flooded with the most primitive, regressive, unregenerate feelings of all, those of sadism. This possibility, that of the ‘perversion’ of the superegoic function, thus reveals an ambiguity germane to the superego which Freud does not pursue, namely whether the superego’s faculty of discipline and control be an aggressive

or a socialising power, whether the two can be distinguished at all, or whether socialisation begins, paradoxically, from a certain force of aggression. To the extent the superego inhibits the ego, insisting that it defer gratification of its wishes, it must appear inimical to it (sadistic); to the extent it subsequently affords the ego pleasure in sublimated form, that of being socialised, it appears to the ego as the least bad way of getting what it wants, and in this aspect looks like an ally (masochistic). The superego turns on this sado-masochistic ambivalence.

Either way, Freudian suicide stems from a superegoic energy; the ego would never be capable of putting itself to death. But if we compare Freud with Durkheim for a moment, we find an almost opposite account in which suicide results from an 'egoism' that signals an inadequate penetration of social feeling into the individual. Of course Freud's and Durkheim's terms function differently, and 'ego' means very different things for each. For Durkheim's egoic suicide, the social agency which functions partly to relieve the individual of its claustrophobic self-relatedness has receded. Precisely the *lack* of 'social feeling' leads to egoic suicide, whereas for Freud the same result ensues, in superegoic form, from that feeling's *excess*. One could hardly have two accounts more perplexingly at odds. Small wonder, though, given their very different agendas, and given Durkheim's assurance that 'no psychopathic state bears a regular and indisputable relation to suicide'.<sup>7</sup> In a manner analogous to contemporaries in the philosophical field of phenomenology, Durkheim 'brackets off' the pathological-psychological that forms the constant focus of Freud's investigations.

Indeed in his work on suicide as elsewhere Durkheim is at great pains to police the border between sociology and any kind of psychology.<sup>8</sup> He writes, for example, that:

If mental disorders are of the decisive importance [in suicide] sometimes attributed to them, their presence should be shown by characteristic effects, even when social conditions tend to neutralise them; and, inversely, the latter should be unable to appear when individual conditions contradict them. The following facts show that the opposite is the rule. [There follow several pages of facts and tables.]<sup>9</sup>

We would be misled, however, in perceiving a straightforward antipathy between psychoanalysis and sociology in general, or between theories of suicide in particular. One may question whether one is comparing like with like, or even the familiar Durkheim with the familiar Freud, the rub being that while Durkheim imperturbably adduces sociological as opposed to individualistic explanations of suicide, he remains the more 'psychological' in his definitions. For, as we shall see in a moment,

suicide appears to result from a preponderance of individual psychology over its own socialisation (and thus carries a threat to sociology *per se*), while Freud operates more ‘sociologically’ than he appears. My reason for saying this is, of course, that Freud’s account of suicide, at least in ‘The Ego and the Id’, is not an account of suicide at all but of murder. What puts the subject to death is the superego operating as representative of ‘society’ in the tripartite subject. A subject is being beaten in that autonomous subjectivity is being beaten out of it. ‘Egoistic suicide’ – Durkheim’s category – can make no sense to psychoanalysis, for the ego is that which wants the best for itself (so immense is its self-love). And on the other hand, Durkheim’s logic is far more Freudian than it seems: left to its own devices, the subject or individual will tend toward dissolution, finding no goal outside itself through which to ventilate its dangerously onanistic self-relation. It is as if to correct the drift toward self-destruction – one might call it by way of provocation the death instincts – that Durkheim’s work springs up. The book *Suicide* as it were admits this prior tendency and, to embrace Freudian terms myself for a moment, its scientific rigour would constitute the symptom of an anxiety provoked by that tendency’s existence.

In other words, the stark contrast between Freud and Durkheim gets fuzzy on closer inspection. For a start a great deal of indecision and revision on Freud’s part confronts us as a tension between an account of masochism on the one hand, the death instincts on the other and suicide as that gravitational field pulling them together. The pull has strengthened enough by the time of ‘The Ego and the Id’ to hook suicide and masochism to the tautological chain of life, death and pleasure that we mentioned above. *Ad absurdam* then: life, that is pleasure, seeks death, that is pleasure, that is masochism, that is suicide, that is death, that is pleasure, that is life . . . Or so it seems: there is one thing capable of arresting the levelling of terms and of protecting the notion of goal-seeking by maintaining distance between them, and that is the tripartite structure of the subject itself. It is because the subject comprises id, ego and superego precisely as intra-relational or dynamic that there can be intra-relationality between the terms of the chain rather than a meltdown of them. So, for example, the superego as destroyer or Mars must remain meaningfully distinct from the ego as eudemonist or Venus; relation exists between these forces if not a clean table of psychic identities. This throws up the question, however, of whether the Freudian ‘subject’ – so slipshod a term – can be measured against the Durkheimian individual, for the former comprehends both the individual and the social. Its sociality inheres more necessarily and inalienably in it (as superego) than is the case for Durkheim

who, if he fears a splitting off of the two, individual and society, might do so because he posits them *a priori* as mutually foreign. For all the sociological aetiology Durkheim produces to explain suicide, a causal explanation it remains – of the social causes creating an individual's events, so to speak (and even though there may be no content to the individual before or outside of such causes) – and thus does not disturb this primary dualism of individual and society.

All of which raises the question of whether Durkheim is talking about suicide any more than is Freud or whether, rather, another kind of displaced murder has presented itself. Durkheim's suicidal individual will have strayed onto the site where those social pressures likely to issue in suicide converge, little more than the hapless occupant of that point on the social network where such pressures become intense and exigent. The individual merely expresses, acts as mere conductor of, that peculiarly catatonic nodal energy which most societies will have at some point on their causal grid. Suicide would be like getting run over at a crossroads of these causes, with society itself at the wheel. Such blackspots can in principle be identified – this ought to be within the remit of sociology insofar as the theoretical conclusions it draws from empirical data allow for a certain amount of prediction – though those pedestrians passing through them may be the least apprised of them (while the sociologist could ably flag them). Which is to say that the Durkheimian project of depriving the individual of individualism turns his notion of suicide into one of collective murder, or perhaps the 'unlawful killing' prominent in later years in British law.

Though having had its subjective intentionality sponged from it in this fashion, the Durkheimian individual would remain an 'individual' literally speaking – indivisible by, though accommodating of, 'society'. It may as we mentioned have no content other than that lent it by its social environment, but formally it remains distinct. This leaves the dualism intact. After all, the individual must be retained methodologically as a fixed screen for receiving mixed social information.

And in fact there is a sense in which this individual will after all have reclaimed some independent individualism, and it is the same as that in which collective murder reverts to suicide once more. What I am referring to is the 'moment' of actual suicide, the instant of pure self-relation in the act of self-murder, a moment which will not in itself have been encroached upon by the company of causes pressing toward it. There comes a point at which the act takes over from the potential. In this instant the individual achieves autonomy even as both are annihilated. This would also be the theoretic point where sociology itself must desist, the individual absconding into a quite other level, that of pure act, if

it can be put like this. In this respect suicide heralds both the life and the death of sociology: the life, as the ideal sociological datum, that phenomenon through which sociology can brilliantly display its *raison d'être*; the death, as pointing up the limit of sociological method, in the transition from cause to act.

Another way of putting this, and of taking the discussion up by way of conclusion to a metacritical level, is to say that sociology allows for a fundamentally scientific construal of the individual in a way that psychoanalysis cannot. The individual can be detached from society for observation; the dualism between the two serves a classically 'scientific' agenda. In psychoanalysis, by contrast, an *essential* indeterminacy affects that relation – 'subjective' representation, identification, substitution, transference, all inhere irreducibly in the social sphere in which individuals move and from which, therefore, they have no exit into discrete individuality. Suicide provides an excellent example of how each discipline deploys a very different modus operandi.

If this is right, that it is formatted more by the undecidable relays of transference than by the attributions of (social) identity, the Freudian subject that emerges will by default frustrate the sociology which, as Foucault says, appends to the 'discursive apparatus' that perceives the human being as related in a fundamentally analytic way to the world. According to Foucault, the discourse of sociology in the late nineteenth century partakes of that general yet largely inscrutable organisation of ideological drives which render the human being in such a way as to make it, like the suicide it may be prone to, an ideal sociological phenomenon. While sociology situates the human above all in relation to institutions, it effectively colludes with, or at least mimics, an institution which it might have considered just one object of study among others, and an object to which Foucault of course devotes a famous study – namely, the prison. Sociology is as much a discursive institution as the prison in that both are united by the perception of the human as institutionally accountable. Sociology and the prison, *inter alia*, govern that zone of figuration populated by what Foucault calls 'docile bodies'. These twin 'panoptic institutions' correspond to a new figuration of the body, of the human being as the body, where 'in becoming the target for new mechanisms of power, the body is offered up to new forms of knowledge':

It is the body of exercise, rather than of speculative physics; a body manipulated by authority, rather than imbued with animal spirits; a body of useful training and not of rational mechanics, but one in which, by virtue of that very fact, a number of natural requirements and functional constraints are beginning to emerge.<sup>10</sup>

This ‘body’ is redefined in its ‘docility’ towards being put under surveillance, its yieldingness to techniques of calculation and to the taxonomic identification of its being-in-the-world as social function. It may be disciplined, where discipline provides at once a means for its control and, to the extent that the disciplined subject cuts a profile of combined regularity and visibility, a means of knowing it in a more perspicuously ‘scientific’ manner. Indeed, knowledge and power indissociably merge.

Now, the terms Foucault uses in his title, *Discipline and Punish* as the English has it, or *Surveiller et punir* in the French, are actually echoes, witting or not, of a phrase that appears in a fourth essay of Freud’s, entitled ‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’ (1924). To put it in context, I cite the bulk of the paragraph where it appears; Freud is speaking once more about the ‘three agencies’:

We have said that the function of the ego is to unite and to reconcile the claims of the three agencies which it serves; and we may add that in doing so it also possesses in the super-ego a model which it can strive to follow. For this super-ego is as much a representative of the id as of the external world. It came into being through the introjection into the ego of the first objects of the id’s libidinal impulses – namely, the two parents. In this process the relation to those objects was desexualised; it was diverted from its direct sexual aims. Only in this way was it possible for the Oedipus complex to be surmounted. *The super-ego retained essential features of the introjected persons – their strength, their severity, their inclination to supervise and punish.* [my italics]<sup>11</sup>

Freud goes on to say that ‘the super-ego – the conscience at work in the ego – may then become harsh, cruel and inexorable against the ego which is in its charge’ – and one is back again on the path to masochism.

We have no way of knowing in which language Foucault must have read Freud’s essay, and in any case it is not my intention to establish a ‘source’. The point is that masochism, which had been fading from our analysis, once again enters the frame, and with it the general question of sexuality, but now in relation to (scientific) knowledge. As agents of surveillance and control, discursively speaking, sociology and the prison function superegoically within or upon the ‘subject’, representing perhaps archaic images of the parents taken from the id. These institutions coincide radically with certain psychic functions of the subject experiencing them, and thus one cannot attribute to them a free-standing reality or objectivity. Going from this hypothesis, the experience of prison for the prisoner will vary only according to the amount of guilt felt in being there. The prisoner who feels no guilt will experience prison discipline as simple hostility (sadism). The guilt-feeling, masochistic prisoner – a more complex case – would also be one for whom

no psychic difference exists between superego and prison, but for whom a certain return of pleasure will be assured along with the sense of guilt. Implicit in both cases is the fact that the prison matches the ambiguous role of the superego in general, combining as it does an effort at socialisation with its functions of punishment and containment. Its affect will be either sadistic or masochistic according to the prisoner in question.

The sociology-prison itself cares little, however, for the forcefield of pulsional drives in which its objects of control (prisoners, sociological subjects or individuals) are deployed. It surveys them disinterestedly, caring only for the quanta of 'knowledge' derivable from them. For this, as Foucault was hinting a moment ago, is how power creates itself – not through an affective or rhetorical or transitive exertion of force upon its subjects, not through a psychological ruse (say of treating one person sadistically or conning another into masochistic complicity with itself), not through any sensuous experience of hierarchy – but through the sheer vitreous availability to itself of knowledge about what is not itself. True, the by-product of such knowledge may be precisely such affective relations of power as those just listed, but this is not the route through which power establishes itself. Power establishes itself through knowledge, not through the phenomenology, so to speak, the dramaturgy even, of power. But subjectively speaking, at ground level, the experience of being 'known' must be one of either sadism or masochism. An implicit link connects knowledge to this sado-masochistic fulcrum.

To generalise from Foucault, the form of social history as a whole from roughly the mid-eighteenth to the late nineteenth century must be one of a pervasive sado-masochism, given the dominance of superegoic forms which discipline, punish, survey, control – and thus *know*. Now it is a case not of the level at which sado-masochism occurs, but of its relative prominence, which varies historically. The 'knowledge' afforded at these historical junctures would be the pay-off too for the sado-masochistic 'subject' whose proximity to the institution would amount to proximity to its own superego. That is to say, the panopticism of which Foucault speaks must in principle render the persons surveyed transparent to themselves too and not just to the watchmen. A kind of infinite paranoia prevails.

Not that this leads to any gain in, or content for, self-reflection. In Freud it matters little whether or not 'knowledge' is added to the sado-masochistic experience – the only criterion which truly concerns the Freudian 'subject' is its own pleasure (and it is thus in its interests to transmute sadism into masochism). But then, even in Foucault it is not certain that knowledge (conjoined with power) has any *epistemic*

substance to it. What is known about the subject, either by that subject or by the institutions from time to time administrating it, is known only at the 'sociological' level, that is in terms of the distribution of its body in space and time. That is what knowledge has become – police intelligence, in effect. Ironically, the 'episteme' that it represents has nothing epistemological about it. And after all, the Foucauldian subject will 'know', quite as clearly as the institutional governors, where it is due and at what time. Its self-knowledge is represented entirely by its 'time-table'. The geography of its movements, and no psychological, ontological or other information, is enough to satisfy the conditions of knowing it. In fact knowledge appears all the more powerful for such asceticism – in a sense it has become a pure science.

And if 'knowledge' in Foucault finds its epistemic interior hollowed out and filled instead with 'police intelligence', the same fate befalls sexuality. This is made quite clear in a discussion by Foucault towards the end of the introductory volume of *The History of Sexuality*. The discussion has in fact been about suicide, and with unmissable allusion to Durkheim:

Now it is over life, throughout its unfolding, that power establishes its dominion; death is power's limit, the moment that escapes it [as suicide 'escapes' sociology]; death becomes the most secret aspect of existence, the most 'private'. It is not surprising that suicide – once a crime, since it was a way to usurp the power of death which the sovereign alone, whether the one here below or the Lord above, had the right to exercise – became, in the course of the nineteenth century, one of the first conducts to enter into the sphere of sociological analysis; it testified to the individual and private right to die, at the borders and in the interstices of power that was exercised over life. This determination to die, strange and yet so persistent and constant in its manifestations, and consequently so difficult to explain as being due to particular circumstances or individual accidents, was one of the first astonishments of a society in which political power had assigned itself the task of administering life.<sup>12</sup>

This 'secret' of suicide marked the dark limit of the otherwise diaphanous *polis*, and there is a sovereignty in sociology as it brings the secret to light. Sovereignty is that power of exposure over private secrets, the feudalistic *droit de seigneur* over interiority and its pathos. *Privacy* is what must be obliterated, which is precisely why the 'subject' comes to be constructed without any content from which it could generate self-consciousness. Essentially this means that all subjectivity is performance; nothing remains in the shadows. And this is also where 'sexuality' comes in.

In the course of the next paragraph, and with the same ideational

momentum, as it were, Foucault will assimilate sexuality to this typology of ‘the great technology of power in the nineteenth century’. For like suicide, sexuality reduces to a locus of exertion for that great technology busy with, in Foucault’s post-Marxist terms, ‘the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes’. It is not that sexuality is repressed, despite appearances, but on the contrary that it is actively produced in the service of that technology, as both its medium and its object (in so far as these terms remain useful).

This leads to an equally complete levelling of terms as in Freud. Sexuality and suicide merge as forms of subjectivity that are all the more ideologically piquant for being so acutely subjective, as it were. The ‘technology of power’ (another form of the ‘sociology-prison’) recognises no difference between sexuality and suicide, for they afford the same possibility of that technology’s *own* exercise. They become abetting functions of that power, and – like knowledge but unlike technology, crucially – bear no content that resembles their essence. Alternatively, the essence of sexuality is not sexual, of suicide is not suicidal. Or at least whatever essence they have has become irrelevant, the ideological dimension in which they exist having rendered essences obsolete while foregrounding function. At most both are facets of the essence of technology, which is to remake the world according to its own powers, like a vast, narcissistic ideological machine that nonetheless has no self. Diverse essences are sucked into this technology and then reproduced as moments of its power – though this exists nowhere outside those moments, but is purely kinetic.

One could go further and say – as a final speculation to end on – that the technology of power even stands in a relationship of analogy with wish-fulfilment in psychoanalysis, in that both are master terms capable of treating the objects under their jurisdiction indifferently. Every object of experience is potential pleasure in Freud, potential knowledge (power) in Foucault, every phenomenon submitted to a dominating force, the will to knowledge or the will to pleasure, that recognises them as equally valid aspects of its own power of cohesion, where the equal value they share overrides their factual distinctness. Which in turn might mean that the ‘essential’ mastery, the ‘real’ domination or control we are dealing with in Freud, Foucault and Durkheim for that matter is that of their own mastery over their own work. Each is a ‘founder of discourse’, to use Foucault’s own description of Freud. And each, in their totalising ways, deploys master terms holding in docile abeyance the body of thought and terminology beneath them. What they discipline and survey is the field of knowledge itself, the content of their work allegorising its

form. That, possibly, is the impurity or contamination to be confronted, though it is questionable that it could ever be definitively known or controlled.

## Notes

1. *SE*, XVII, p. 185.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
3. Collected in *SE*, XVIII.
4. *SE*, XIV, p. 252.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
6. *SE*, XIX, p. 53.
7. Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (London: Routledge, 1952) [hereafter referred to as *Suicide*], p. 81.
8. It is with Durkheim's discussion of 'egoic' as opposed to 'altruistic' and 'anomic' suicide that we are concerned.
9. *Suicide*, p. 70.
10. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 155.
11. *SE*, XIX, p. 167.
12. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), pp. 138–9.

# White Over Red

O Rose thou art sick.  
The invisible worm,  
That flies in the night  
In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy:  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.

(William Blake, 'The Sick Rose')

Try as I might, I cannot make a mistake. Everything I do – no matter how stupid, how socially inept, how askew from even my own designs – will be just right. I cannot fail.

Under what circumstances could one make such a claim?

Under the circumstances of psychoanalytic theory, that's how. As long as the 'I' refers to a psychoanalytic subject, the claim has perfect validity. Freud's famous work on parapraxes – slips of the tongue and the like – paradoxically implies the psyche never goes wrong. Chapter ten of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* is entitled 'Errors'. Paragraphs two and three read, in Strachey's translation, as follows:

In my *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a) I was responsible for a number of falsifications which I was astonished to discover after the book was published. They concern historical points and, in general, points of fact. After closer examination I found that they did not owe their origin to my ignorance, but are traceable to errors of memory which analysis is able to explain. On page 266 (of the first edition) . . . I refer to the town of *Marburg* – a name also found in Styria – as Schiller's birthplace. The error occurs in the analysis of a dream which I had during a journey by night and and [sic] from which I was awoken by the guard calling out the name of Marburg station. In the content of the dream someone asked a question about a book by Schiller. In fact Schiller was not born at the university town of Marburg but at *Marbach* in Swabia. Moreover I can assert that I have always known this.<sup>1</sup>

One can perhaps detect in this some professional embarrassment, a scholar's banal mistake dressed up as an analytic curio and then betrayed again with the pompous defence, 'Moreover I can assert that I have always known this.' Noteworthy also is the fact that the text quoted, on errors, itself contains a typographic error, with an extra 'and' added after 'during a journey by night and'.<sup>2</sup>

On the next page, Freud puts forward his standard explanation of this and the other errors cited, affirming that 'where an error makes its appearance a repression lies behind it – or more correctly, an insincerity, a distortion, which is ultimately rooted in repressed material.' That repressed material makes up the Unconscious. It had to be repressed because it contained wishes of a libidinal nature that in the open would not have been tolerated. When fragments of such intolerable material do slip out, they meet – depending how much they disguise themselves in the process of presentation – the actual disapprobation the fear of which triggered their original repression.

But despite their baleful reception that condemns them as erroneous or disgraceful, these apparently random emissions accomplish a psychic truth. An error has indeed been committed but, as it happens, is erroneous from a certain perspective only. *Psychically* speaking, the error was right, the right thing to say, the right thing to write. And it is indeed as if Freud is saying to us on these pages, 'Look, I was right!', 'I was wrong, but I was right!' For the psyche has performed its function swimmingly. It repressed something unacceptable, then dropped its guard, then out came *exactly* what it had yearned to say. 'I wanted to say "Marburg"!', exclaims the psyche, 'and I got to say it!'

What an upside to everyday life. Either I am right in the normative sense, or I am 'wrong' but getting a psychical hit from my errors. But of course more middle ground exists. Owing to its ability for disguise, repressed material need not limit itself to cameo appearances in flagrant but isolated slips like these; as long as it wears the right social costume it can pass for normal for whole stretches of time – which means it merges with the socially palatable form of self-gratification Freud calls sublimation. 'Marburg' may have been an error, but it's not so far off from 'Marbach' and, for all Freud's donnish awkwardness, it hardly smacks of transgression – not to mention that it's quite possible 'Marburg' itself disguises, or adjusts upwards as it were, an error more treacherous. A psychoanalytic bridge of sorts appears before us, spanning from 'truth' to 'error' in the following order:

1. I write 'Marbach' correctly, free from interference by my repressed material.

2. I write 'Marbach' correctly, but actually 'Marbach' is my repressed material in perfect disguise (model sublimation).
3. I write 'Marburg', which is 'Marbach' contaminated by my repressed material. It is therefore *both* academically incorrect *and* psychically correct, yet not so academically incorrect as to be unrecognisable (inept sublimation). This is what happens in Freud's text.
4. As in (3), but the error is far worse than it seems, the repressed material more vicious. In this case 'Marburg' is working as a kind of dummy error (mock-inept sublimation). This point on the bridge could be placed elsewhere, on account of its trickery.
5. I write '\*\*\*\*\*', a grotesque and mortifying error (failed sublimation).
6. I write 'Marbach' correctly, nor is any other error discernible in my text to indicate a visit from the repressed material. However, the lack of error itself appears symptomatic. Alternatively, the repressed material now runs in the form, rather than the content, of what I write – in the rhythm, the pauses, even the choice of genre.
7. I write and write, my writing perhaps abounding in a variety of all the above types of truth and error, but with a substantial quantum – perhaps all the rest – of my repressed material never showing through in any form, no matter how distorted or displaced.
8. I do not write, but all the above possibilities displace onto other activities.
9. All my repressed material remains hermetically sealed, never to see the light of day.

No doubt we could divide the points still further, though of them the first stands out. It sits precariously atop the others, for the sheer possibility of number two (model sublimation) undermines it – and it *has only* to be possible for radical, constitutive uncertainty to seed. No one can prove for sure whether 'Marbach' represents the conscious truth or a deft interloper from the Unconscious. And if 'Marbach' cannot be proved, its condition may be generalised to include – why not? – all individual expression, spoken, written, gestural and otherwise. It need only be structurally possible for repressed material to mimic all functional, truthful, normal, conscious expression, for this crisis of indecision to spark off.

Equally unnerving, but from a different angle, is the overall infallibility of the psychic system, for the Unconscious looks incapable of launching anything but perfect errors. Whatever the Unconscious ends up expletting, even where truly offensive (point (5) above), it neither loses its line out to it nor, coevally, refuses the pleasurable vibrations

transmitted back. The psyche constitutes a system indeed. The mistakes it makes are *its* mistakes, tethered on the wish-telegraph and always representing faithfully, if polymorphously and perversely, the material repressed. The shapes may change but they remain cut-outs, so to speak, from the Unconscious's black paper.

Which raises a decisive question: what if 'Marburg' were not Freud's error? What if the signal had gone down somewhere between Freud's own repression into the Unconscious of some inexcusable material and the slip of the pen that produces not 'Marbach' but 'Marburg' instead?

Freudian theory of course would rule that out as inadmissible, and for axiomatic reasons that include the psyche's systemic unity. Without it, slips and other symptoms become untraceable scintillas of ever-potential meaning, heaped like jigsaw pieces that don't relate to pictures. For what really matters about Marburg and Marbach is that each shows a different side of the same psychic coin, and the unshakeable 'monology' in this underpins the theory of psychoanalysis from end to end. Free association, for example, a praxis devoted to demonstrating the essential continuity of apparently discontinuous elements, would, without that centripetal pull of the singular psyche, degenerate into hopeless chaos. Childhood stories would become unattributable in principle, thus forcing their reclassification as fictitious baubles. The whole Freudian edifice, in truth, would begin to crack. Even the theory of fantasy, which flashes on elements extraneous to the individual psyche, fails to provide indemnity. For in fantasy the psyche shows it can collect any foreign disjecta into the diorama of its own wishes, taking them on from other people or elsewhere and exhibiting them as icons of its own ultimate oneness. Nor is it just the individual psyche that benefits – after all, it is that unity of a given psyche that guarantees the analytic and interpretative relation to it. With what would psychoanalytic technique *be* in relation if its object, the individual psyche, were disaggregated from its core and in its very principle? We shall come back to this in a minute.

So the psyche is always right, but on condition that it is *a psyche*. Perhaps the stakes are not so great after all. But when in later writing Freud breaches further to argue that even death may be 'right' for the psyche, matters become more grave. What the theory of the death-drive paralogically lays out is that death, far from marking a fatal error in the life of the psyche, actually supports and completes it – it even brings pleasure. In this sense death is the greatest slip of all. It is as if the psyche blurts out 'death!' when 'life!' was the thing to say; despite and because of the anathema it carries, doing so cashes in a pleasure deferred. Dramatically outbidding the 'mistakes' it might make in slips of tongue or pen, the psyche effectively gambles its own existence. It should have

said life, but the uncontainable anticipation of pleasure coursing through it made it substitute death instead. (One of the many complications here lies in that because *both* 'life' and 'death' give it pleasure, the psyche cannot always distinguish the two. But nor does it need to. As far as the psyche is concerned, pleasure – the fulfilment of wishes – matters more than either 'life' or 'death' which have value only as media for pleasurable returns. In this sense, saying 'life' equates to saying 'death', which now makes 'life' the ultimate slip. 'Life' is but the camouflage of 'death', and indeed of itself, in that 'life' really means 'my pleasure'. Further permutations could follow.) The fundamental point is that what shows up as a fatal error of the psyche, when it speaks 'death' instead of 'life', in fact signals a moment of psychic vitality and pleasure. Freud's theory of the death-drive, in other words, continues the logic of parapraxes, whereby material that appears to contravene social or rational norms, and so threaten the status of the very psyche responsible, functions on the contrary to sustain and gratify that psyche. For we are indeed within a *psychical* logic, a *psychical* analysis. The notion of a deathly 'perfect error' requires careful separation, then, from its rationalist look-alikes, which I shall spend a moment on.

The first of these must be the notion of death as a condition of life. One could argue that being a condition of life, death already was a perfect error in some sense. Qua conditional, death ushers in a rightness to the decease of life it perpetrates, a contractual completeness, and so amounts to a perfect error in its own right . . . Arguing so may be valid, but it departs from Freudian psycho-logic or psychoanalysis. The death-drive – considered as a *drive* at least – empties of meaning once death is installed as life's condition, for a *condition* need not, indeed *cannot*, be driven towards. Crudely put, if we are to die anyway, what need a death-drive? From this viewpoint, the two arguments clash irreconcilably. Either death is the condition of life, in which case a death-drive is pointless, or, inversely, the death-drive is at large, suggesting *de facto* that death cannot be a condition.

On the heels of this, perhaps a sub-point of it, comes the notion of mortality which also, as a built-in 'error', that is, a *built-in* error, could be construed as planned or 'right' in some way. According to the rule of mortality, life was set to go 'wrong' – to the point of not 'going' any more at all. Life was set for death, programmed for it. But where does that leave the psyche? What is the difference between mortality and psychoanalytic death? Was this psyche bound to die? Was the 'slip' inevitable and if so could it legitimately have been a slip? Two broad answers offer themselves. Although Freudian slips must always be *right*, they need not *always be*. Retaining the title to repress in principle everything

asked to, repression simply isn't working if slips have become inevitable. The possibility of the inevitable slip thus menaces the very principle of repression – which is nothing less than the condition of possibility of the Unconscious (without repression, the Unconscious would not, could not, have formed). And yet one thing alone will never bow to repression, one slip that everyone makes: its name is death, and no one has might enough to deny themselves its gratifying necessity. Peculiarly, this implies death's pureness from unconscious or repressed residues, despite the depth of its provenance: non-repressible, not subject to being plunged into this or that Unconscious, death takes on a strangely surface character. Which implies in turn that death cannot slip, for it has no unconscious prison to slip from. Thus far, it seems that psychoanalytic death rather resembles 'built-in mortality' after all. Unlike common or garden slips, death just *had to be* – there is no getting around it, and if the psychoanalytic psyche manages to express it in a slip-like – a pleasure-yielding – manner, its expression does anything but constitute a daring display of repressed material, for death had not been, could not have been, repressed. After all, one cannot 'bring to light' what was not hidden (to use Freud's language of the Uncanny).<sup>3</sup> And yet. The evidence doesn't quite stack high enough to prove that psychoanalytic death was built in à la mortality. Death may be non-repressible and necessary to that extent, but its pleasure-giving properties invite the psyche to interpret and reposit it, precisely and perfidiously, as the exact opposite. In its wish-saturated stupidity, the psyche will read death, because it sensed some pleasure in it, as non-necessary, ergo an occupant of the realm of free will, with all appropriate *jouissance* radiating. So long as whatever it is provides the pleasure the psyche so indefatigably chases, the psyche will not recognise it as necessary – the necessary leaves no room, by definition, for freedom or choice or will or pleasure. *Psychically*, therefore, death may be experienced as avoidable, which in turn *allows the possibility* of the psyche pursuing, nay driving towards, it. At bottom, you can pursue only what you might miss. And to be able to pursue the pleasure in death, the psyche will, even if it *has* been built in, jettison death so that it can then refind it on its own terms.

Was the psyche programmed to die, as if mortal in the conventional sense? In other words, does it obey time in the same way, or at all? For when we observe that we are mortal we tacitly make a claim about time – whose forward march assures the inevitability of death. Again this may do for a rationalist mindset, but as we have just seen, its pleasurable quality leads the psyche, erroneously no doubt, to sort death into a different category, from inevitable to evitable. Once there, death can put on the temporal vestments that go with it, principal among which will

be the aleatory, the sudden, the inadvertent, the disruptive and the disjunctive. To the psyche, the last thing death looks like is the terminus of an inexorable time-bound processus. So we circle back: death becomes a slip again, the psyche reorients it as pleasurable accident rather than ineluctable tragedy.

Finally, in separating psychoanalytic from rationalist versions of death, it's important to distinguish two kinds of organicism: on the one hand, an organic or natural sense of death as the limit of life's ripeness; on the other, the 'instinctual' aspects of Freudian metapsychology. Although Freud postulates a state of organic inertia as the destination of life, that state will be one that the psyche has returned to rather than encroached upon in that moment of conjoint fulfilment and dereliction we know as death. The psyche has not gained a final frontier so much as shrunk back to an 'earlier state of things', as we know Freud puts it in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'.<sup>4</sup> The ripeness becomes one of utter precocity. But it *is* still a ripeness and a rightness of sorts, and death is not just a slip but also a masterful, atavistic summation – a perfect error.

Our original question, however, awaits an answer, namely what if 'Marburg' were not *Freud's* error? What if the error were not so innocent and came to jeopardise the systemic and unitary nature of the psyche that we noted? Already we have a hint. We were saying that death, strictly speaking, escapes all repression. Though the psyche may trope it out differently, image it as errant pleasure and to this extent 'repress' it, death will enjoy immunity from repression proper, in the shape of its absolute necessity; it may be 'repressed' with a small 'r' in this psychopoetic way, but never will it undergo full-blown Repression, for unless something lets itself in principle be repressed in perpetuity, *never* coming to light, it cannot be said to be subject to repression at all, and this is not the case for oh-so-necessary death. Death will out in the end. On this view, it will never belong to a psyche, never stoop within its orbit. A given psyche may weakly repress it, mock-repress it, but, like moonlight inside a room, death will only reflectedly allow projections of itself into the psyche. But does death in any way split the psychic atom apart? These benign reflections and poetic indulgences do little to trouble the psyche's wholeness, but the story doesn't end there. Yes, the psyche does 'use' death, in a psychoanalytic sense – it even 'cathects' it – and to do so it has first to channel death back towards itself in a gesture that must both locate and therefore unify that psyche. So far, so safe for the psyche. But *in* this false repression, this shadow-incorporation, the psyche has taken in something quite toxic. Quite apart from the fact that the psyche has played at its own deletion (this is death, after all), it has also 'taken in' a part larger than its whole. Along with its pleasurable imagery of death,

the psyche has ingested a necessity, and necessity is the nemesis of all private or inner space, necessity is structurally exterior. By staging this pleasure-trope, this 'repression' of the non-repressible, the psyche has opened itself apart from within. Exteriorty unfolds the psyche, its inner surfaces multiplied beyond themselves out onto the unencompassable planes of a shared necessity. Even in the midst of using death for its own integrity, it performs an impossibility that explodes it.

How bad is it? Perhaps for the vast majority of Freudian slips this need not be bothersome. Most slips do not say death, they give voice to a lower-order pleasure – they disclose practicably repressible elements whose repressibility *de facto* holds no threat of disintegrating the psyche. So long as they *can* be repressed, the psyche can repress them without undue fear of them ripping it apart. 'Marburg' would seem to belong in this category. Mildly masochistic maybe, it hardly brings down the force of death, and so remains attached to Freud, not exposing his psychic horizon to the stretching and puncturing that death would have promised. *Unless*, of course, *all* slips and parapraxes, qua pleasure-giving, immediately tune in to death's penetrating and intense frequency. 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' makes no distinctions: it seems to say that all pleasure counts as deathly insofar as it seeks the selfsame absence of stimulation that characterises death. In which case not only does each minor slip carry a death-charge, thus posing the psyche in all its wishful moments as utterly risked, but again the concept of repression demands revision. The instant of death's entry dissolves all borders between repressed and non-repressed. Its complete necessity, as we were saying, exempts it from the repression economy, for necessity spells non-repressibility. The entire topology of the psyche would have to change accordingly, repression serving not just as a function of the psyche but as a structuring principle. As soon as pleasure gets bound up with death, the hinges of the repression mechanism suddenly slip. If everything pleasurable is deathly, nothing pleasurable can be repressed – and that precludes the formation of the Unconscious. More precisely, the Unconscious becomes a counterfeit prison, lacking *any* secure limit. It opens up, losing at a stroke its special status as a discrete psychic area. The psyche must have a quite different structure from that described by Freud, even after the shift from 'topographic' to 'dynamic' versions of the psychic apparatus, for the latter leaves the essential relationship between wish-fulfilment and wish-repression intact. Once the psyche begins to wish – nothing less than its founding act – it begins to wish for death, that is that state of peace already destined non-negotiably for it. The certainty of this destiny renders all acts of repression futile or impossible – death cannot be made unconscious, neither can the Unconscious,

at least in its Freudian formulation, establish itself. If there is repression, if there is unconsciousness, their role is pseudonymous. The function of wishing becomes that of withstanding death's necessity, and doing so through a kind of poetic gesture that creates a false recess, a theatrical tomb or play-secret within the psyche, where the non-repressible is believed to reside. What name could one give to that space within the psyche of the non-repressible, the pseudo-repressible? In truth, it cannot be named a 'space' at all, more a refraction across the psyche of death's heavy light, a hologram. And it gets worse: the keystone of psychic unity erodes further under pressure from death's necessity. For necessity can count a kind of absolute objectivity among its many features. No relation developed by what remains of the individual psyche with its own death will make any difference: repress it, mock-repress it, deny it or ignore it, that death will happen. And though death happens to the psyche as a psychic singularity (death cannot kill in general terms, it can only kill specifically), as death and as necessary it abides eternally outside the psyche, oblivious to the psyche's singularity which it respects only as a means of isolating that psyche when its number comes up.

The domino effect continues. With death reposed on the axis of necessity, not only do psychic unity and the Unconscious begin to fall over, but repression, already shaken, suffers a further blow. Where once repression had truck with the very presence of death, now it cedes that relation. Let us recall: the work of repression deposits material into the Unconscious – material that, to be sure, should remain hidden and absent from consciousness – but the deposit may always be reactivated. Though hidden, it can be said still to be *present*, albeit withdrawn to a secret location. The psyche sustains a relation with repressed material with which it cohabits and which, though dormant, retains sufficient life to be revived at any time. In a moment I shall turn to Jacques Derrida's writing on the death-drive, but already a not un-Derridean argument emerges here. For the necessity, the remoteness, the inassimilability of death already qualify any 'presence' death might enjoy and of which, in turn, the psyche might avail itself (how can one repress what has no presence?). How does this come about? Necessity, prime factor of death, does away with presence by dint of repelling all contingency. Defining itself against contingency – against, that is, temporalisation, coming-to-presence, the potential to change or be changed, sensuous appearance in time – necessity steers death steeply up and away from the world of presence and so beyond the grasp of repression. Such a 'beyond', of course, crosses no spatial boundary, for necessity loops away with and then makes vanish the coordinates of location *per se*. Nor is it its status as necessity alone that puts death beyond repression. Death balks at

presence for a still more definitive reason, namely *death has no presence*, being nothing if not the end of presence, and a non-present end of presence in general. What would death be if this were not so? And what can repression do with the never-present? What is repression's fate? If repression 'exists' – highly doubtful – it neither represses in the Freudian sense, for this presupposes a presence, nor does it allocate material to a delimited psychic zone known as the Unconscious, for the latter cannot yet have been built. It all results from that fusion of pleasure with death that Freud essays in the later work. Pleasure's disport with death casts it out from presence and, at the same time, into the arms of necessity. No psychic function can shelter from the violation done to the psyche's structure. Though the psyche may continue to wish – to take the pre-eminent example – the concomitant work of repression must now move in a mysterious way whereby its selected material flickers in a twilight between its impossible repressive inclusion and its sheer ectopic withdrawal. A quite other dimension interleaves itself in which pleasure comes, or comes back, to the psyche without ever achieving psychical connection. Nothing touches. As for 'Marburg', it could not be Freud's error, classically speaking, for the seismic repressive tensions that allowed for both its original staving-in and its subsequent bursting-through could not but have coupled with a deathly force – not different from the force of pleasure – that curves along, crosses over and divides a non-proximate border to a disintegrating psyche.

Derrida's highly nuanced relationship to Freud and to the death-drive in both Freudian and other forms impacts this discussion in at least two places. First, the Freudian slip may be reread in the terms Derrida applies in particular to Husserl and throughout *The Post Card*.<sup>5</sup> Considered as a time-delayed message the psyche sends itself, the slip skirts a danger prevalent in all self-communication, namely losing the message in transit. 'Marburg' may not be Freud's error on the basis that as a message the psyche emits – though maladroitly – it runs the risk of hijack on its outward-bound as well as its return journey to the psyche, whereupon it conveys the pleasurable embarrassment typical of slips. Unless a message can in principle be lost, Derrida argues, it cannot be sent – potential failure supplies the condition of its success. It's not quite that 'Marburg' *cannot* be Freud's error but that, owing to the ineradicable chance of it having been purloined *en route*, there is no way of telling if it is or isn't. Extending this logic to the 'slip of death', what befalls the psyche in its final moment would not necessarily count as the 'right' death at all. The psyche – along with the body – may die, but it may die 'erroneously', dying a death that cannot unequivocally be called its own. The slip may have got mixed up with others, been appropriated, etc. It

may even be, as we have touched on in earlier chapters, that the dominant philosophical and common-sense understanding of death as pertaining intrinsically to the person who dies itself requires re-thinking.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless that death, that right-wrong instant is nothing if not catastrophic, and here we find an ambiguity in Freud that suffers a second impact from Derrida's work.

The ambiguity elides or confuses destruction with preservation. We know the death-drive has as its ulterior goal a state of perfect peace equivalent to the satisfaction of a wish – the 'absence of unpleasure'. Again, we have touched on this before, but without giving consideration to the flip-side (except, as in the last chapter, as a form of masochism). In this formulation of death as peace the notion of destruction remains curiously at bay, yet the death-drive surely does more than facilitate pleasure, more than coax the living psyche – the living soul, one might say – to slough off its own thrashing complexities. Were this the be-all and end-all, death really would be a means of perfection, a rarefaction of the psychic soul to its barest core. Indeed, along an arcing trajectory a kind of ideal metempsychosis would have taken place. So where has the destructive element in the death-instinct or the death-drive gone? Freud's best answer says that it gets directed outwards onto other people or things. For the purposes of clarification, I quote a long extract from 'The Ego and the Id':

. . . we have to distinguish two classes of instincts, one of which, the sexual instincts or Eros, is by far the more conspicuous and accessible to study. It comprises not merely the uninhibited sexual instinct proper and the instinctual impulses of an aim-inhibited or sublimated nature derived from it, but also the self-preservative instinct, which must be assigned to the ego and which at the beginning of our analytic work we had good reason for contrasting with the sexual object-instincts. The second class of instincts was not so easy to point to; in the end we came to recognise sadism as its representative. On the basis of theoretical considerations, supported by biology, we put forward the hypothesis of a death instinct, the task of which is to lead organic life back into the inanimate state; on the other hand, we supposed that Eros, by bringing about a more and more far-reaching combination of the particles into which living substance is dispersed, aims at complicating life and at the same time, of course, at preserving it. Acting in this way, both the instincts would be conservative in the strictest sense of the word, since both would be endeavouring to re-establish a state of things that was disturbed by the emergence of life. The emergence of life would thus be the cause of the continuance of life and also at the same time of the striving towards death; and life itself would be a conflict and compromise between these two trends. The problem of the origin of life would remain a cosmological one; and the problem of the goal and purpose of life would be answered dualistically.

On this view, a special physiological process (of anabolism or catabolism)

would be associated with each of the two classes of instincts; both kinds of instinct would be active in every particle of living substance, though in unequal proportions, so that some one substance might be the principal representative of Eros.

This hypothesis throws no light whatever upon the manner in which the two classes of instincts are fused, blended, and alloyed with each other; but that this takes place regularly and very extensively is an assumption indispensable to our conception. It appears that, as a result of the combination of unicellular organisms into multicellular forms of life, the death instinct of the single cell can successfully be neutralised and the destructive impulses be diverted on to the external world through the instrumentality of a special organ. This special organ would seem to be the muscular apparatus; and the death instinct would thus seem to express itself – though probably only in part – as an instinct of destruction directed against the external world and other organisms.<sup>7</sup>

The deathliness of the death instincts works against others, not the self. Where destructiveness wells up, it gets diverted outwards thanks to the ‘the combination of unicellular organisms into multicellular forms of life’. Thus Freud’s account has the error of death, so far as it concerns the psyche, made safe or ‘perfect’ again. The directing outward of its aggression shields the psyche from itself, preserving or ‘conserving’ it – effectively it doubles as a life-instinct to add to its less compromised egoic pulsions.

Freud is less than convinced or convincing, however. It is not self-evident that such an instinct can be diverted and remain the same, nor that a residual or superordinate ‘death-drive’ does not continue to operate, fuelled by a remainder of destructiveness *not* expeditiously released that intimidates the psyche in a less riddable manner. After all, if the death-drive merits the status of a drive, a principle beyond the pleasure principle no less, would it let itself be diverted in so economic a fashion? Does it not rather structure the economy of the psyche in a – let us say – ‘transcendental’ way that would protect it from being routed hither and thither? Could there not yet be a more virulent, a less servile slip that energises the death-instinct, something that slips through psychic control altogether? In *Archive Fever*, *États d’âme de la psychanalyse* and elsewhere, Derrida conducts an extremely interesting discussion around these and related themes. In the most general terms, he will, first of all, bring out and emphasise the destructive aspect of the death-drive; secondly he will say that the death-drive does indeed destroy more destructively, so to speak, than Freud gives credit for; and finally he will argue that even within such hyper-destruction an affirmative element prevails.

A few pages into *Archive Fever* Derrida lights on the sixth chapter of

Freud's *Civilisation and Its Discontents*. The chapter is largely retrospective, with Freud relating the phased construction of psychoanalytic theory, and loudly echoes the quote above from 'The Ego and the Id'. Freud again reins in the destructiveness of the death-instinct. He writes, for example, that

even where it emerges without any sexual purpose, in the blindest fury of destructiveness, we cannot fail to recognise that the satisfaction of the instinct is accompanied by an extraordinarily high degree of narcissistic enjoyment, owing to its presenting the ego with a fulfilment of the latter's old wishes for omnipotence. The instinct of destruction, moderated and tamed, and, as it were, inhibited in its aim, must, when it is directed towards objects, provide the ego with the satisfaction of its vital needs and with control over nature.<sup>8</sup>

One could describe Freud's view here as a 'civilising' in its own right, seeing as it does a powerfully countervailing movement to 'the blindest fury of destructiveness', which restores the equilibrium of 'control over nature'. The destructiveness provides a vehicle of pleasure, a joy ride, for the selfish ego, thus making any 'fury' seem like bluster. In contrast to Freud's civilising gesture, Derrida wants to wrest the destructiveness back into focus. To aid him he refers to an earlier remark by Freud concerning the silent quality of the death-instinct. In a few lines we shall look at in some depth, Derrida says that the drive is 'mute', citing Freud's German word, 'stumm'. He continues:

It is at work, but since it always operates in silence, it never leaves any archives of its own. It destroys in advance its own archive, as if that were in truth the very motivation of its most proper movement.<sup>9</sup>

Derrida has begun his gloss or elaboration on Freud's remarks which, beyond the word 'stumm', he quotes no further at this point. What (Strachey's) Freud had actually written was:

It was not easy, however, to demonstrate the activities of this supposed death instinct. The manifestations of Eros were conspicuous and noisy enough. It might be assumed that the death instinct operated silently within the organism towards its dissolution, but that, of course, was no proof. A more fruitful idea was that a portion of the instinct is diverted towards the external world and comes to light as an instinct of aggressiveness and destructiveness. In this way the instinct itself could be pressed into the service of Eros, in that the organism was destroying some other thing, whether animate or inanimate, instead of destroying its own self. Conversely, any restriction of this aggressiveness directed outwards would be bound to increase the self-destruction, which is in any case proceeding. At the same time one can suspect from this example that the two kinds of instinct seldom – perhaps never – appear in isolation from each other, but are alloyed with each other

in varying and very different proportions and so become un recognisable to our judgement.<sup>10</sup>

Many, many things these are to note in this *controversiae* between Derrida and Freud. Most obviously, Freud does *not* say the death instinct ‘is mute’; he says ‘*It might be assumed* that the death instinct operated silently within the organism towards its dissolution, *but that, of course, was no proof*. *A more fruitful idea was* that a portion of the instinct is diverted towards the external world and comes to light as an instinct of aggressiveness and destructiveness’ (my emphasis). That the death-drive operated silently was an unprovable assumption and, what’s more, less fruitful than another idea. Again Freud saves the psyche, in its early form as organism, from its own ‘dissolution’, and again by mooted the diversion of destructive instincts outwards. (In any case Freud’s emphasis lies on the professional difficulties of demonstrating the death-drive, the ‘silence’ of which stands in for a more general statement about the death-drive’s inaccessibility to science.) Not much more than hypotheses, these words about silence on the one hand and external diversion on the other – and of the two, Freud rejects the first. So when Derrida says on Freud’s behalf that the death-drive ‘is mute’, he is making an assertion out of a hypothesis, and a discarded hypothesis at that. His ‘strong misreading’ – as Harold Bloom might call it – matters because it goes to bolster his main thesis at this point in *Archive Fever*, that the death-drive ‘leaves nothing of its own behind’.<sup>11</sup> The supposed silence of the death-drive permits Derrida to deduce that ‘it never leaves any archives of its own’.<sup>12</sup> The French text has, ‘Elle est au travail, mais dès lors qu’elle opère toujours en silence, elle ne laisse jamais d’archive qui lui soit propre’.<sup>13</sup> Now, the dubious silence *suggests* self-effacement, perhaps, but does not absolutely imply it – the confidence of ‘mais dès lors qu’elle’ cannot fully be justified. If it is a question of, yes, preserving the destructiveness of the death-drive, these few lines by Derrida speak less to a defensible argument than to an apparent desire to make sure, in the face of the ambiguity in Freud’s text, that the death instinct husbands the maximum destructiveness possible. Just as Freud civilises the death-drive, so Derrida looks set to savage the civility, to destroy it. And though the two ‘instincts’ vie with each other, both – Freudian and Derridean – seek to preserve something.

But let us try to be as clear as possible in this very dense context. What does the death-drive, the death-instinct, the destruction-instinct destroy? (Derrida calls it a ‘three-named drive’).<sup>14</sup> Is it the psyche or is it the drive itself? And what would be the difference? On the questionable assumption of its silence, Derrida claims the death-drive ‘leaves

*nothing of its own* behind': 'It destroys in advance its own archive, as if that were in truth the very motivation of its most proper movement.'<sup>15</sup> Self-destruction belongs definitively to the death-drive in so far as it destroys its own 'archive', that is any trace of itself, whether or not it also destroys more widely. Derrida's vivid prose makes the point with force, but two further blocks stand in its way. Of these Derrida acknowledges only one: the death-drive has facility enough to disguise itself – to paint itself, as he puts it, 'in some erotic colour'<sup>16</sup> – and if it can do this, the death-drive seems very much to leave behind *something*. But in a remarkable, perhaps Heideggerian, turn of logic, Derrida dismisses the problem:

This impression of erogenous colour draws a mask right on the skin. In other words, the archiviolithic drive is never present in person, neither in itself nor in its effects. It leaves no monument, it bequeaths no document of its own. As inheritance it leaves only its erotic simulacrum . . .<sup>17</sup>

Remarkable because of the strict separation Derrida insists on between the drive and its 'effects'; Heideggerian because that withdrawal into non-presence strongly evokes, at a structural level at least, the ontico-ontological difference. The death-drive leaves nothing of itself behind, having destroyed itself in advance, and yet it leaves an 'erotic simulacrum'. An erotic simulacrum is left, but the death-drive has not left it – or, if it has, is not present in it in any way. But how exactly? How could even a non-present, auto-destructive drive simply desist from all relation to its own disguise? How can its simulacrum not belong to it in any way, shape or form? Is it axiomatic that a simulacrum cannot comport in any way what it simulates? Is the disguise a simulacrum even? Having acknowledged the possibility of such traces – the 'exceptions' to the rule of destruction – and dealt with it in this less than watertight fashion, Derrida's next paragraph begins, as if sweeping the problem under the carpet, with 'But, the point must be stressed, this archiviolithic force leaves nothing of its own behind . . .'.<sup>18</sup> The other block, the one not addressed by Derrida, takes the form of Freud's diversions. For the death-drive, as Freud has said, can divert itself outwards as aggression, in which case it has done nothing if not preserve itself, even if in an alternative mode, and even if, as we have seen, some of its destructive power may have been tempered. In sum, there are four chinks in Derrida's thesis of the death-drive's self-destruction:

1. Contrary to Derrida's move, Freud does not assert that the death-drive works in silence.
2. It is not unquestionable that such silence indicates self-destruction.

3. The death-drive can disguise itself, and its disguises may as well as not preserve it.
4. The death-drive may also divert itself outwards, thus keeping itself ‘alive’ in other forms.

None of this means that Derrida may not be right, but his grounds, on these two pages at least, want stability. If Derrida persists with his argument in this pressing and overdetermined manner, its dynamic derives in part from something over and above any logic or reason deployed. His words, his tone, have the feel of a destruction-instinct, in short – as far as one can ever ‘detect’ such a thing – the wilful sustenance of a destructive power. This instinct brims over the logical steps that Derrida makes or wants to make, even as a ‘dangerous supplement’ to the argumentation. No proof can be had here but, were it true, it would point not to a silence of the death-drive, but to a volubility, a copious over-saying. By the same token, a multitude of traces and effects would present themselves, the death-drive having egregiously failed to destroy anything of itself or to stem the proliferation of delegates.

In the later *États d’âme de la psychanalyse* Derrida inflects somewhat differently the position in *Archive Fever*. I offer my own translation, along with the original:

For thought – for psychoanalytic thought to come – is there another beyond, if I can call it such, a beyond which would pitch itself beyond those *possible* beyonds still represented by *both* the pleasure and reality principles *and* the death instincts or sovereign mastery, all of which seem to exert themselves wherever cruelty declares itself? In other words – in quite other words – can this apparently impossible, but *differently* impossible, thing be thought, namely a beyond of the death-drive and of sovereign mastery, and therefore the beyond of a cruelty, a beyond having nothing to do with either drives or principles?

Y a-t-il, pour la pensée, pour la pensée psychanalytique à venir, un autre au-delà, si je puis dire, un au-delà qui se tienne au-delà de ces *possibles* que sont encore *et* les principes de plaisir et de réalité *et* les pulsions de mort ou de maîtrise souveraine qui semblent s’exercer partout où de la cruauté s’annonce? Autrement dit, tout autrement dit, peut-on penser cette chose apparemment impossible, mais autrement impossible, à savoir un au-delà de la pulsion de mort ou de maîtrise souveraine, donc l’au-delà d’une cruauté, un au-delà qui n’aurait rien à voir ni avec les pulsions ni avec les principes?<sup>19</sup>

We find Derrida establishing the agenda for his subsequent analysis, but already substantial leverage on Freud is being exerted as he pushes inquisitively, impatiently on the ceiling of psychoanalytic thought,

looking for access to another beyond. One of the conquests of *Archive Fever* had already been, legitimately or not, to impugn the standing of the death-drive as a ‘principle’ (‘we must not forget that the death-drive, originary though it may be, is not a principle, as are the pleasure and reality principles’),<sup>20</sup> and now, once more, a doing-down of principles comes into view. A beyond of the beyond glimmers on this threshold: just as in *Archive Fever* the death-drive will have destroyed itself while maintaining a certain force, so here the beyond of the beyond betokens a caesura in the death-drive’s presence, whether it started with any or not. In such a surpassing beyond, death could not ‘be’ in any form. It especially could not ‘be’ a principle, this requiring some architectonic relationship to its complementary or family terms, whereas in what Derrida writes all structures – architectonic, metaphysical, psychoanalytic – come up against their *nec plus ultra*. A different dimension, not just overleaping the dimension of the antecedent beyond, but exiting dimensionality altogether, places itself invisibly in Derrida’s speculative schema.

In another variation on the argument in *Archive Fever* Derrida now introduces the notion of cruelty, and with this we return to our debate around errors – the maleficent-beneficent, happy faults the psyche lives by. Already Derrida can envisage a beyond of cruelty too (‘a beyond of the death-drive and of sovereign mastery, and therefore the beyond of a cruelty’) or, more precisely, the beyond of a certain type of cruelty, the received kind, that borne along by the psychoanalytic instinct for destruction. Just a few lines earlier he stated he would not pursue the question of a ‘cruel instinct of destruction or annihilation’ (‘une pulsion cruelle de destruction ou d’anéantissement’).<sup>21</sup> Rather he wishes to pinpoint cruelty in that realm where the death-drive will have ‘destroyed its own archive’, where even principles have unravelled, where all guiding reason, all overarching law, all remits of the possible, all capacity to make sense of things, have fallen away – an ‘anarchic’ realm, as *Archive Fever* styles it.<sup>22</sup> What takes place in this realm of madness that governs the psyche under its anarchic sway? Can the psyche still recover itself within this world of aberration and indeterminacy? Can it yet convert the error all around into something sustaining for its living soul?

Derrida will make no positive statement – perhaps none is possible – but in a ‘hypothesis upon a hypothesis’ he will conjure the thought that this exquisite destructiveness of the beyond of the beyond, of the cruelty without measure, may be precisely the stuff of life. In the course of a sentence that will detain us a while, he writes ‘if there is something irreducible in the life of the living being, in the soul, in the psyche . . . and if this irreducible thing in the life of the animate being is indeed the possibility of cruelty . . .’ (‘s’il y a quelque chose d’irréductible dans la vie le l’être

vivant, dans l'âme, dans la psyché . . . et si cette chose irréductible dans la vie de l'être animé est bien la possibilité de la cruauté . . .'),<sup>23</sup> and then goes on to conclude a long sentence. A link has been forged between life and death. For the 'irreducible thing in the life of the animate being' may be the 'possibility of cruelty', and the possibility of cruelty hails from the death-drive in its both inwardly and externally destructive form. How does cruelty come to have such lineage? According to Derrida, cruelty has become 'the drive, if you will, of evil for evil's sake, of a suffering which would play at enjoying the suffering of a making-suffer or of a making itself suffer *for the sake of pleasure*' ('La pulsion, si vous voulez, du mal pour le mal, d'une souffrance qui jouera à jouir de souffrir d'un faire-souffrir ou d'un se-faire souffrir *pour le plaisir*').<sup>24</sup> It has embraced the fatal Freudian interanimation of death and pleasure, Thanatos and Eros, and reconfigured it so that now the death-drive, having been determined by cruelty in this way, no longer submits to following an *end* or purpose, either for a purpose or goal for itself, or a purpose or goal in general. Now it associates with 'mal pour le mal', evil for its own sake – which should not be read as a self-directed, self-fulfilling project in which evil seeks to posit itself, but as unbound, arbitrary, deathly pantomime without justification, and therefore without justice or principle. Yet this chaotic, unjustifiable, even meaningless surplus, because it cannot be 'reduced', explained away or placed in a higher category, has to be respected as somehow 'essential', uncircumventable, an indelible imprint in all living being(s). It breathes, therefore, in the very quick of life, as a principle-sans-principle – despite the risk, despite the moral confusion – of affirmation. This dreadful, originary contamination of life helps fertilise its coming-to-be. Error would now mean not a deviation from the correct path, but a deviation from 'path-ness', so to speak, and towards error 'for its own sake', for no reason – *the possibility of which* allows for all subsequent paths to be laid.

How are we to understand this quasi-erroneous, ultra-malign 'evil for evil's sake'? What does the expression 'for its sake' really mean? Derrida's '[le] mal pour le mal' may or may not resonate with 'l'art pour l'art', 'art for art's sake', but it engages an 'aesthetic' of sorts, not unrelated to Kant's notion of art as 'purposefulness without purpose'. And how does the 'for its own sake' relate back to psychoanalytic theory? Is that where pleasure began, in a 'for its own sake'? If we go back and follow through Derrida's thought in *Archive Fever* concerning 'erotic colour', we come upon this:

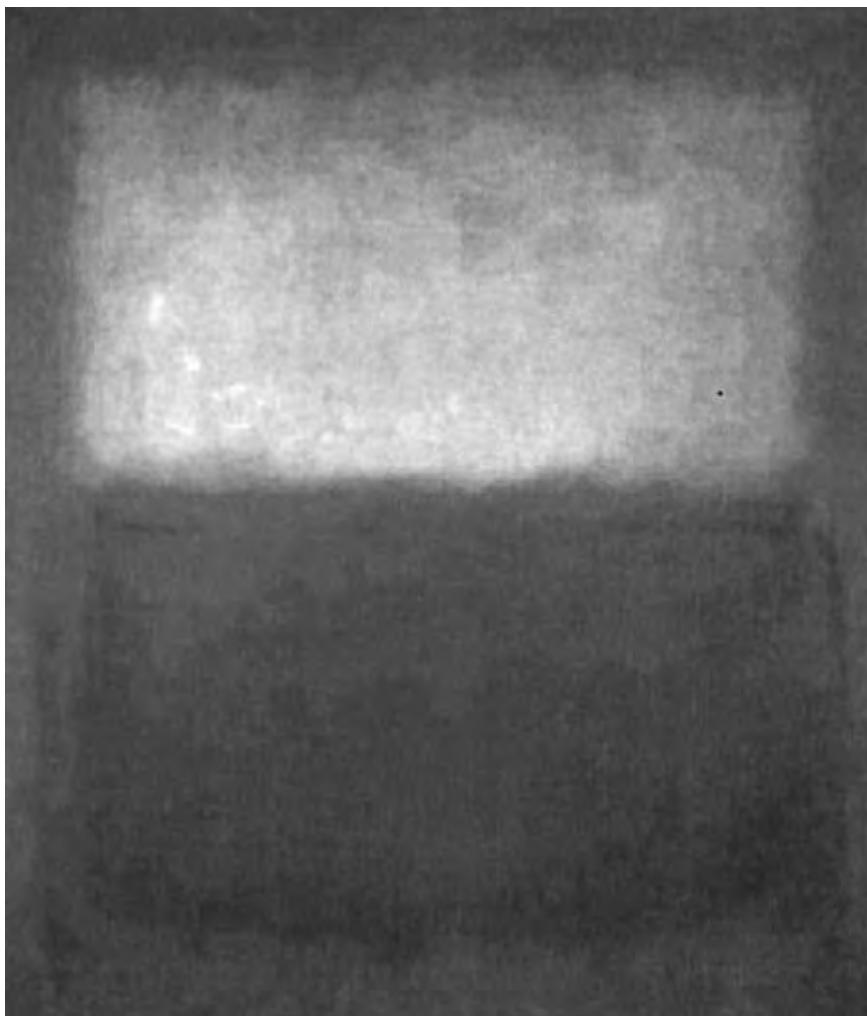
... the archiviolithic drive is never present in person, neither in itself nor in its effects. It leaves no monument, it bequeaths no document of its own. As

inheritance, it leaves only its erotic simulacrum, its pseudonym in painting [this an allusion to Derrida's earlier text *The Truth in Painting*],<sup>25</sup> its sexual idols, its masks of seduction: lovely impressions. These impression are perhaps the very origin of what is so obscurely called the beauty of the beautiful. As memories of death.<sup>26</sup>

Taking this together with *États d'âme de la psychanalyse* it seems a primordial cruelty, that of the self-destroying destruction-drive, gives out onto beauty as a distant disguise of that cruelty for its own sake. Origins, principles are razed in a saturnalian bonfire of metaphysics and, in its traceless trace, false impressions, meretricious designs, are left as pseudonymous testaments of that ultimate cruelty – one that, having annihilated itself in a hyperbolic gesture, will never have been. We have come a long way from the Freudian slip and yet the 'for its own sake' was just what empowered the psyche to take its pleasure beyond the Unconscious. Granted, this may constitute another 'strong misreading' of Freud, but what are slips and other symptoms if not a pleasurable cruelty for its own sake, a 'making itself suffer for the sake of pleasure', in Derrida's terms? After all, the psyche *had* the means of repression, had generated everything it needed to manage its own profit-and-loss, so why these fireworks of errors from the unconscious? Freud catalogues them under 'neurosis', but this exorbitant exposé for no good reason characterised by the slip could equally be seen as a more disconcertingly wayward superabundance of error, of pleasurable cruelty, unjustified by even a neurotic need for expression or failure to prevent it. For the sake of what, then, do slips and errors get made? For their own sake? As a word, 'sake' has experienced a rich history in northern European languages where often it comes to mean 'cause' in a legal sense: having a case or cause or 'thing' ('sake' connects to the German 'Sache', meaning 'thing' in English). By extension, almost by inversion, it has meant 'guilt' and even 'sin'. It signifies that presenting thing in either a court of law or broader arena of justice and justification, by which the plaintiff will present a cause – and, critically, a cause that pertains exclusively to them, *their* cause, *their* sake as a marker of social, judicial, moral identity in the world. 'Sake' points back at its bearer. In this context of self-protection – here is my sake, my thing, that I am defending, the cause I will not forsake – it bears intimately upon the survival of its proprietor. As such, a sake gets trapped between two opposing tensions, both requisite for it: on the one hand, this thing must make its case and justify itself in public, rational terms; on the other, it cannot be presented, denoting as it does the very innerness of my interiority, my sake, my 'ownmost' as Heidegger might say, that energy of a self-preservation too archaic, too private ever to come forward and thereby risk not being

seen as my cause, my sake, any longer. Its authenticity harbours in this inexpressible living singularity forced to defend itself by an exposure that ruins – by definition – that sakeful innerness. In the Freudian death-drive, as we have seen, there is little to suggest the catatonic implosion of the death-instinct that Derrida sees in it – and to this extent the Freudian death-drive *is* preserved ‘for its own sake’, *can* adopt the rank of principle, of eternal psychical structure. It makes sense, then, that Freud’s language itself becomes one of justification, an attempted rationalisation of the death-drive before the academic or professional court, whereas in Derrida’s notion of cruelty as modus of the death-drive, an instinct works precisely against its own sake, against its own survival: its cause is to destroy its sediments, itself, and in so doing it forebends any requirement of self-justification. And yet he can write of ‘[le] mal *pour le mal*’ (my emphasis): does it – death, cruelty, evil – preserve its non-preservation? Is the absolute liberty that exonerates it from facing the law and making its case something it must guard for its own sake?

With these themes of beauty, justification, the death-drive, I want to finish by picking out, from the millions of artifacts available, just one, as a touchstone for this discussion. This is Mark Rothko’s painting *White Over Red*. Is there any sense in which we can revise the slogan ‘art for art’s sake’ in the light of a pleasurable cruelty that does away with itself? Any first move would have to go ‘beyond’ aesthetics as a domain of the transcendental or the metaphysics of principles (the temptation will always be to reappropriate such a ‘beyond’, even a ‘beyond of the beyond’, as a latter-day Sublime). One passage would be through the ‘archiviolithic’ as Derrida puts it, though we shall have cause to intervene in and adjust some of his thinking. Let us say that the archiviolithic is that self-destroying thing without a cause that leaves both ‘lovely impressions’ and, in its form as irreducible cruelty, also animate beings, psyches and souls. Because *both* of these derive from that deathly force, both the living being and the ‘dead’ artistic object, it may be that they share in something that, despite the apparent difference, unites them, that even melts the distinction between life and death. Or better, their shared parentage in the suicidal death-drive may mean that ‘dead objects’, artistic, painterly, aesthetic or cosmetic falsities inhere in the living soul or psyche and vice versa. Now that principles, categories, architectonics, lie among its wreckage, the death-drive will have cleared the way for the absolutely unexpected, the indeterminable *per se*, that which will both have and be pure difference – new, unique, quite unique. And this may be precisely what the psyche is, that is the living soul, the unique, new, unheralded erroneous difference of a new living thing for its own sake and it its own autochthonous perfection.



Mark Rothko, *White Over Red* (1957) © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko ARS, NY and DACS, London 2009. Reproduced with permission.

Can we approach 'art' in this way, as the facture of erroneous singularities? Can the art object, in its intense singularity, be said to 'represent' (not the right word) the loss of generality or of principle? Evidently, art objects will always belong or be understood as belonging to schools, movements, isms, periods and oeuvres, and to that degree acquiesce in their own generalisation or tabulation. But what occurs at this empirical level of taxonomy and classification does not pre-empt – and may even signal resistance to – a possibility further out, that of

the ‘unique error’, a singularity eluding classification, that enables the art object to appear as such, as itself, a pleasurable entity, and to do so by having first destroyed itself so as to allow the positing of its special traits. While classification will instruct us in the genealogy of an object, where it belongs, its art-historical coordinates, the object for its part will – in a very early moment, before it even begins – have had to neutralise and annul all genealogy in order to create the possibility of its own genealogical appearance. But whose pleasure is it? On the model of the Freudian slip, the artwork would redound pleasurable to the artist as a kind of psychic skid from the unconscious that leaves colourful patterns – tokens on the outside, in their gilded folly, of some erotic sense from the psychic inside. Within this somewhat conventional hermeneutic environment, that pleasure could then be activated at intervals by this or that beholder and made to fit, or not, some personal inner eros. Freud’s proviso here would be that art objects, being good sublimators, have made the psychic journey far enough to arrive at classical or civilised ground, lost their rebarbative erotic accent, and let all artistic intercourse become proper. By contrast, we are confronted with a pleasure that cuts across the hermeneutic exchange between individual psyches. Such pleasure, once again, would be that for its own sake, that is the protection of its emergence as such, the ‘pleasure’ of a determinate contingency, of being a ‘living’ thing, in possession of some *anima* or *psyche* not to be conflated too readily with a *bios*.

When I then turn to this painting I am, first of all, turning to *this* painting and no other. True, what you see is a reproduction; moreover, for this or any reproduction to exist there must have been, to borrow again from Derrida’s stock, a reproducibility in and of the original itself that could be said to corrupt its originality.<sup>27</sup> But these facts do not (nor would Derrida claim they do) impede the reference to ‘Mark Rothko’s *White Over Red*’, this one, the one of 1959, the definite article by Mark Rothko – *and no other*. Its originality may indeed have suffered a corruption from the possibility of being reproduced, but the painting, regardless of the number or form of copies in circulation, can yet attest to being this painting and this painting only. Such a faculty suggests in turn a decisive break with everything not itself, even where it alludes to or intertextualises with other works, painterly or not. It may well come to be associated or classified with other works; it may, more fundamentally, have been sourced in its influence from them; but still, to be itself, alone, to take up that ‘essential solitude’ of the artwork,<sup>28</sup> such a break will indeed need to have occurred. If it continues to relate to anything before that break it does so, at this level, only from within itself, as if memory, for all such things will have been annihilated *for*

it as a prerequisite for its own emergence – all will have been brought forward but only into it, into the artwork, nowhere else, and brought forward only as, precisely, those things – everything – it will have left out from itself in order to establish its own sake. It brings forward what it has had to exclude or abolish for its own sake, for, having been abolished by the artwork, such things – other artworks or texts – can be said to ‘survive’ – but as utterly excluded – in the new artwork only. More thoroughgoing than Hegelian sublation or *Aufhebung*, this process prohibits any *incorporation* or *retention* of excluded elements, but rather signals exclusion and exclusivity per se. Relating now to everything it has excluded, which can be nothing less than *everything else*, the new artwork, in its singularity, accedes to an undreamed-of ‘intertextuality’ without semantic or hermeneutic connections. For his part Derrida seems to claim that the new artwork itself would get caught up in this movement of exclusion. As ‘erotic simulacrum’ the artwork will have passed through a moment of cruel self-incineration before making its appearance, such that, in its final presence, it will have excluded its very self too – or, more exactly, the archiviolithic death-drive has done itself in and left these ‘lovely impressions’ divorced from their thanatographic origin. But that, as I say, is where we take issue with Derrida. If beauty sails under the star of the death-drive, the light from the latter is made up of two near-indistinguishable elements: (1) the error of contingency, the destruction of all *genera*; (2) beauty’s ‘moment’ of exclusion or annihilation that cuts off everything else for its own sake. Neither amounts to an archiviolithic death-drive in the Derridean sense, despite their proximity to it: the psychic self-preservation of the artwork will have been achieved not through a ‘memory of death’ to paraphrase Derrida, but through a hyperbolic access of self-positing that gives it – though this is not the opposite – ‘life’.

Now, no painting can *illustrate* this status it holds – it simply *is* it. It would be feeble to claim therefore that the play of white and red in Rothko’s painting, for example, somehow *demonstrates* the generative rupture in its own coming-to-be, for rather the painting as a whole and the *fact of* the painting are *of* such status. This could all serve to disarm any critical relation to the painting. After all, how does one engage with the *status* of a work? Can there be any aesthetic rapport in a space and register so abstruse? But the problem is false. Precisely because that status delivers *this* work, *this* object, an all the more ‘aesthetic’ – that is particular, critical, sensitive, customised – response is called for. Such a response might want to begin from the terra firma of symbols: for instance, the political and/or military connotations of white and red in tension with one another. Or the contusion of white and red may tempt

us into seeing if not the status of the artwork illustrated, at least an allegory of that status, for the red could suggest a violence that the white – this is white *over* red – has come to salve and dress, as if the painting were acting out the trauma of, if we follow Derrida, the originary violence done to it and by it – from which it now recovers or redeems into its own existence. Equally, we might want to identify in that screen of white the intimation of a ‘beyond’ and, in its garb of recessive whiteness, even a ‘beyond of a beyond’. But such readings are tendentious at best. There is also a more straightforward psychoanalytic reading of Rothko’s painting as perfect error, which says that much like a Freudian slip *White Over Red* embodies repressed material inadvertently exposed; or, given its obviously crafted nature, repressed material pretty successfully sublimated into civilised if original form, a notion supported by the painting’s formal affinity with the majority of Rothko’s output. And we could carry on putting our interpretative coins into Rothko’s red-and-white box to make it speak different idioms. The painting’s own silence heralds at once a complete resistance, a flat repugnance, to being spoken for *and* a cavernous openness or accessibility to voices that would invade and inhabit it – there is an astonishing vulnerability of the art object in general, and of this painting in particular, to such voices. If it makes sense at all to speak of the *sound* of this painting, it would be the sound precisely of that contradictory movement between the stilling of all voices and the forming of a kind of voice-box – the painting become a voice-box vibrating with the murmur of tongues. Again, it would be foolish to think of *White Over Red* actually *representing* such a contradiction. Secondly – to stay with the tone or, for want of a better phrase, the *structural affect* of *White Over Red* rather than trace its hermeneutic profile – is it too far-fetched to claim of this painting that *it thinks*? As well as the formal hints of thinking in the painting – the white screen as the eyes/head/brain/forehead, its measured elevation, the apparent privilege of vision and the cerebral (white) over the somatic or visceral (red) – is there not thoughtful appraisal in or of this painting, not thinking as calculation, but an ‘it thinks’ of a status not a million miles from Heidegger’s ‘es gibt’? If so, such an ‘it thinks’ provides the necessary accompaniment to the notion of ‘its own sake’, that labile reference to its having undergone the rigours of exclusion in order to arrive here as itself, for this thinking it does has been prompted by the need to shield itself as itself, to be at the beginning of justifying itself as such, to come to the threshold of reason but no further. It is at this point that the painting preserves its error, itself.

Who will decide if death has a place in these beautiful, artistic errors? Slipped out, released into itself, does the artwork not call out to be

reconsidered, whether or not it has a dark history in the death-instincts, compromised or not by an inner structure of reproduction, in terms of its impossible self-justification? It has made a mistake for its own sake, guilty of its own contingency, and that is why and what it thinks. No amount of talking will pardon it. Sorry.

## Notes

1. *SE*, VI, p. 217.
2. Perhaps I am being unfair in calling Freud pompous – thanks to Julian Patrick for the following note: ‘The German for this sentence is “Ich behaupte auch, daß Ich dies immer gewußt habe”, which A. A. Brill, otherwise so error prone, translates simply and correctly as “I maintain that I always knew this”. (Brill leaves out “auch”, because unlike “assert”, “maintain” implies it.) So there goes the pomposity. Blame Strachey. And the typesetters for the extra “and”: it’s gone in the Penguin Freud Library.’
3. *SE*, XV, pp. 217–51.
4. *SE*, XVIII, p. 36.
5. Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. with an Introduction by David B. Allison, Preface by Newton Garver (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973); Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
6. See also my *Derrida and Autobiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
7. *SE*, XIX, pp. 40–1.
8. *SE*, XXI, p. 121.
9. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 10. Hereafter referred to as *Archive Fever*.
10. *SE*, XXI, p. 119.
11. *Archive Fever*, p. 11.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
13. Jacques Derrida, *Mal d’archive* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1995), p. 24.
14. *Archive Fever*, p. 10.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
19. Jacques Derrida, *États d’âme de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2000), p. 14. Hereafter referred to as *États d’âme*. See also Derrida’s earlier essay, ‘The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation’, in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 232–50.
20. *Archive Fever*, p. 10.

21. *États d'âme*, p. 14.
22. *Archive Fever*, p. 10.
23. *États d'âme*, p. 12.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
25. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
26. *Archive Fever*, p. 11.
27. For an interesting discussion concerning the place of the original artwork in relation to its copies, see Jérôme Dokic, 'Music, Noise, Silence: Some Reflections on John Cage', trans. Timothy S. Murphy and Robert Smith, in *Angelaki* 3: 2 (1998), 103–12.
28. I refer to Maurice Blanchot's essay of the same name, in *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*, trans. Lydia Davis, ed. P. Adams Sitney with a Preface by Geoffrey Hartman (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1981), pp. 63–77.

# Literature – Repeat Nothing

‘Words, words, words.’ (*Hamlet*)

The title of Ian McEwan’s 1998 novel, *Enduring Love*, invites images of a romantic relationship surviving adversity with the rich resources of sentimental intensity. But those images are qualified severely when the story gets under way. First, the love portrayed is unrequited; second, it is pathological; third, it is homosexual (in a markedly heterosexual world); fourth, it is a manifestation of Christian fanaticism. The word ‘enduring’ in the title becomes menacing, suggesting obsession. It also reflects back on the object of the love who must ‘endure’ the menace such ‘love’ presents.

The unrequited, pathological, homosexual, Christian-fanatic lover is called Jed Parry; his beloved, the novel’s protagonist, is Joe, through whose first-person narrative the novel mainly proceeds. Until Jed comes along, Joe, who writes popular science articles for magazines, has an enduring love of his own, of a conventional, secular, bourgeois and heterosexual kind, with Clarissa, a lecturer in English literature. Although Joe and Clarissa’s relationship gets derailed by Jed’s obsessive love for Joe, the couple ultimately reconcile, with Jed by then securely cordoned off in a mental asylum. The structure of the novel provides a fairly obvious defence of such *Gemütlichkeit* as lived by Joe and Clarissa, with the outsider banished from their world after a kind of trial by otherness. Joe and Clarissa’s love endures, but so does that of Jed who for years continues undeterred to write Joe impassioned letters from the asylum – letters which the staff do not pass on, in the interests of protecting Joe and, in effect, the values he represents.

Issues of class consciousness aside, *Enduring Love* foregrounds the longevity of love, its tenacity and its dependence on a notion of perpetuity. Jed embodies it in taking up vigil outside Joe’s house: love keeps coming back, indefatigably; love endures. If love is a generally libidinal

phenomenon, its libidinality is almost pure energy, ever-burning and inextinguishable, a sustaining fuel which keeps the lover productive and energised, constantly creative and restless in his solicitation of the love object. Indeed, love would have to be libidinal, for only the libido (at least as conceived by Freud) could sustain such unreserved productivity. Jed finds ever-new inspiration for his paeans to Joe, even in the face of Joe's rebuffs; in fact the rebuffs are inconsequential relative to the sheer prolific engagement of Jed's enduring love.

But therein lies a paradox. Is such libidinal energy creative or destructive? Original or repetitious? Productive or reductive? In his letters Jed can always find fresh material with which to apostrophise Joe and express love for him, but precisely that creativity is obsessive, repetitive and monomaniacal. The letters are always fresh and stale in equal measure: surprisingly new, sometimes absurdly so, so unbounded is their ingenuity; but also crushingly repetitive, with their solipsistically incorrigible insistences and pleas. Is there any fundamental difference between allegedly pathological love and the 'normal' kind? It would only take Joe's acquiescence in the relationship for Jed's love to be normalised. Both kinds of love come under the same stricture to endure, and endurance presents us with a deeply puzzling quality. What kind of resourcefulness is it that the libido harbours? Does it deaden or invent? To the extent that love must endure to prove itself, its libidinal energy channelled towards reaffirmation, cannot its sustainment and repetition over time be seen equally as deathly and reductive as creative and life-affirming? As much as it is energetic, libidinal and resourceful, enduring love is also monotonous, constant, singular, reductive and, in this regard, resourceless.

This paradox in the notion of libidinal creativity will be my guiding thread, as I transpose it to the creativity involved in literary works (in a sense Jed's tireless, eroticised writing is literary work of its own). I begin with the assumption that whatever else the literary might be, it appertains to 'creative' writing: though not all creative writing is literary, all literary writing is creative. Insofar as they are creative, literary works may be grouped with other artifacts and activities that transmute or sublimate libidinal energy into a more or less 'civilised' form. All are expressions, in a sense, of enduring love. What distinguishes literary from other creative works is a question I address at the chapter's end. But I begin by filling out the psychoanalytic background condensed in the terminology of the libido and of sublimation that I have already used.

In contrast to the subsequent wealth and sophistication of literary criticism and theory considering itself psychoanalytic, Freud's own writings on the subject of literature as such are, as is well known, few and

often surprisingly ingenuous. His most general statement appears in 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' (1908 [1907]). Freud casts creative writing as a form of day-dream or 'phantasy' akin to child's play: 'The creative writer [the German word is *Dichter* which carries no necessary implication of creativity, even though it might suggest the same] does the same as the child at play'.<sup>1</sup> This is not to suggest that creative writing is all sweetness and light. The phantasies are displacements of wishes repressed and never impinge upon a 'happy person':

We may lay it down that a happy person never phantasies, only an unsatisfied one. The motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfilment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality.<sup>2</sup>

Being phantasy-driven, creative writing thus labours under the sign of 'unhappiness'. However, the creative writer will transform such subjective misery into objective pleasure, sparing the reader from the indecorousness of the writerly condition, modifying egoistic interests and proffering aesthetic satisfaction instead. He or she does so through disguises:

The writer softens the character of his egoistic daydreams by altering and disguising it, and he bribes us by the purely formal – that is, aesthetic – yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his phantasies.<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere Freud argues for the sexual essence of such aesthetic pleasure, a kind of foreplay or 'fore-pleasure'; here his focus on disguise blends with an argument for the reconstructibility, or rather the aetiological completeness, of the creative or phantasying process. He has already assured us that 'even the most extreme deviation from that model [of the day-dream] could be linked with [creative writing] through an uninterrupted series of transitional cases',<sup>4</sup> and now he implies again the ideality, so to speak, of the creative psyche which, for all the detours it will have taken, all the masks it will have put on for its phantasy-aesthetic, may nevertheless be tracked back to its motive origin. Though the highways and byways of phantasy be many and wayward, all belong in the same psychic dimension, affirming the latter's unity even as they scramble and warp it.

That motive origin, of course, has the libidinal form of a wish, and a wish, because it constitutes the psyche as such, can never be destroyed, only repressed and/or dissimulated. The wish furnishes an impregnable reserve to fund 'creative' activity. The creative, in this case literary, works resulting mark the devious formal or 'aesthetic' accommodations of repressed and refracted wish. In so bursarial a system, the stronger

the repression of the wish, the more ‘creative’ the psyche is likely to be. In an analogous case we shall turn to, Freud proposes that ‘[t]he greater the resistance, the more extensively will acting out (repetition) replace remembering’.<sup>5</sup> The push-and-pull effect is clear. Creativity increases with repression.

The exchequer of this system is not unproblematic, however. The Freudian psyche, as we suggested, does make for a holistic entity (despite the internal interference it generates), but, importantly, is unable to assume its own integrity. The in this case literary psyche depends for its literary disposition upon a wish, its repression and its subsequent escape from repression, in the camouflage of aesthetic form; it will have duped the censoring mechanism of repression into allowing the now disguised, even beautified, wish into the showplace of representation (‘no representation without distortion’). The repressed promises the writer aesthetic treasure, but, *being* repressed, remains locked to any conscious raiding of it. The writer waits on its whim, powerless to regulate the flow of material which, when it bursts through, he or she will make into literature. The repressed shrinks from intentional appropriations of it; a schism in the psyche has formed, the writer become, to paraphrase Nietzsche, a ‘stranger to himself’.

With the repressed now the fount of literary material, what the creative writer has been endopsychically separated from is effectively a muse. Deposed from its deific or transcendent altitude, the muse of classicism has been reallocated by psychoanalytic modernity to the psyche, preserving therein a distance that replicates the effects of such height and authority. What was very high has become very deep. The function remains the same. Where the muse was transcendent, capricious, exterior and yet private, so the literary repressed stands inaccessible, unpredictable, lodging ‘within’ the psyche as a kind of outside or unapproachable recess. The writer becomes the mere dummy or secretary of an inscrutable force that is at once intimate and foreign, close yet remote. Freud has thus given variation to a long-standing theme in literary tradition. The ablest expositor of this tradition, Timothy Clark, sums it up:

In both the Platonic and the biblical traditions inspiration described the supposed possession of an individual voice by some transcendent authority. The muse speaks, and the poet is only her mouthpiece or servant; or in the medieval Christian tradition the human *scriptor* has authority only as a scribe of divine truth.<sup>6</sup>

The writer merely transcribes his own repressed, his muse.

But evidently, an ambiguity bothers this structure. On the one hand, nothing could be more creative or original than the writer who is

‘inspired’. On the other hand, this inspiration derives from without the writer, or at least from outside the precincts of intention, and so circumscribes any creativity claimed. The level of volition and agency defies being specified – a problem traceable perhaps to theological disputation concerning free will (how far are our actions voluntary, how far prescribed?). The muse, the literary repressed: each is the writer’s personal other, which dictates imperiously either an already ‘known’ material latterly veiled through the anamnesis of repression, or an entirely new stock of words. Either way, inspiration comes as a surprise to the conscious mind, and it’s not certain that ‘the writer’, whatever singularity that designates, knows what’s going on. At the same time, as much as he or she is possessed *by* this closeted voice of inspiration, the writer is possessed of the literary skill which belatedly orders the messages coming through into aesthetic wordings. What, then, is the nature of creativity? For all the aesthetic gain got via this psychic exchange where repressed voices splinter through, its final products – literary works – remain pathogenic objects, even in the aura of their new-found beauty, just as in the Platonic tradition invoked by Clark, inspiration closely resembles mania, and poetry is the cooled fire of frenzy. They result from a process the creativity of which appears spurious, as much a blind irrigation of pulsional urges as the blessed act of free artistry that ‘creativity’ might suggest.

The ambiguity gets carried over into later psychoanalytic writing. In a Kleinian study titled *Dream, Phantasy and Art*, Hanna Segal avers:

The act of creation at depth has to do with an unconscious memory of a harmonious internal world and the experience of its destruction; that is, the depressive position. The impulse is to recover and recreate this lost world.<sup>7</sup>

Segal’s emphasis on reparation, on a paradise regained, construes the creative work as a compensatory epiphénoménon of mental well-being in rather simple opposition to the trauma it supersedes and alleviates, leaving its creativity unclear: note the irresolution in the word ‘recreate’. The creator has only redeemed the Atlantis of his inspiration, not made it afresh; and, according to Kleinian teaching, that world would reappear anyway, if not in creative then in destructive and regressive acts of vengeance. The word ‘impulse’ is equally telling, hedging as it does between conscious and unconscious action. The definite article serves only to mystify it: ‘*The* impulse’. Whose impulse? Where in the psyche does an impulse spring from? The nearest Segal comes to an answer amounts to a tautology:

The artistic impulse is specifically related to the depressive position. The artist’s need is to recreate what he feels in the depth of his internal world.<sup>8</sup>

While Segal reproduces the ambiguity there in Freud (not that its resolution is at all obvious), she departs strikingly from the Freudian view of repression. Creativity increases with repression for Freud, whereas Segal points to the ‘laxity of repression which is decisive for allowing the expression of phantasy’.<sup>9</sup> The difference opens a deep cleft within psychoanalytic theory and, as far as I know, little notice has been taken of it. It has to do with a liberalising of Freud, a humanistic eliding of expression with freedom, where repression can be coaxed by means of therapy to step aside and allow the bounty of creation through in all its goodness. The build-up of repressive pressure must be alleviated and creativity will ensue, in a model of aesthetic production that looks innocent next to Freud’s recognition of the subterfuge required for artworks to deceive the watchtower of repression. In Freud aesthetic works are only and essentially disguised; in Segal they are the denuded tokens of inner truth.

In the latter view, creativity has become what Clark, glossing Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, calls ‘a vestige of Romantic individualism’.<sup>10</sup> It is moreover ‘central’ to a ‘concept of subjectivity’<sup>11</sup> – a subjectivity which, purportedly bestowed with an inner essence, needs the complementary functions of creativity and expression to bring that essence out and thus confirm it was always there. Creativity supports a doctrine of free, democratic, subjective, essentialist individualism. Other psychoanalytic literature, especially of a therapeutic bent, only endorses the doctrine. A version of it appears in a text by Christopher Bollas, called *Cracking Up: The Work of Unconscious Experience*. Resuming the book’s thesis, Bollas writes:

This process – of collecting condensations which in turn serve as the material of disseminative scattering – is vital to individual unconscious creativity in living. If a person has been fortunate enough to develop this capability, then he will develop in turn a ‘separate sense’, which evolves from a certain kind of unconscious development and is part of the function of unconscious intuition. However, this kind of inner experiencing may be impossible for an individual whose life is dominated by a trauma, whatever its source.<sup>12</sup>

On the same page Bollas talks of ‘[u]nconscious freedom, as opposed to unconscious imprisonment’, and this dualism sustains the whole book, including the quote above. What is ‘vital’ is the freeing-up of an unconscious otherwise in danger of paralytic seizure. Bollas complicates the trope of creative release by giving it the hour-glass shape of ‘collecting condensations which in turn serve as the material of disseminative scattering’, but the complication leaves the opposition between free and unfree, the quick and the deathly, frozen and thawed, intact.

His innovation lies in positing an oxymoronically mature narcissism, whereby the creative individual has evolved an internal ‘separate sense’, a kind of genius of the psyche, to register creative activity.<sup>13</sup> Bollas has also sublated the difference between aesthetic and non-aesthetic into a general ‘creativity in living’. No especial privilege redounds to works commonly considered aesthetic, so that the free, healthy, released practice of absorbed day-dreaming, for example, bears in principle equal ‘aesthetic’ rank as a work such as *Moby-Dick*, which Bollas discusses. True, Freud also associates aesthetic work with day-dreaming, but he specifically differentiates the aesthetic by its ‘formal’ quality.

The somewhat facile healthiness in Bollas’ portrait of individual creativity has clearly sloughed off the darker, more painfully wrought elements attending Freudian aesthetic work. In both Freud and Segal, in fact, literary products constitute the more or less transparent, more or less displaced, *preservations* of ‘trauma’ (a term as vague and idealised as ‘original sin’, and with similar implications), where Bollas regrets that it ‘may be impossible’ to accede to creativity while under trauma’s reign. Within this notion of preservation lie adumbrations of the deathliness of literary production, and one approach to the subject passes through Bollas’ own comments on obsession and repetition. Still nursing the binarism of free and unfree, Bollas confides that:

Psychoanalysts come across many people who lack the unconscious freedom necessary for creative living. Their freedom is restricted, their mind bound in anguished repetitions that terminate the dissemination of the self.

This obstruction to freedom is easily observed in the person who is obsessed.<sup>14</sup>

While the citizens of the demos engaged in creative living fulfil themselves through disburdened expressions of self, the poor, banalistic creatures debarred by their own psyches from such liberal favours languish amid immovable terminal repetitions (I put it in these terms because a reading through of *Cracking Up* leads one to suspect Bollas of the naively liberalist agenda also sustaining *Enduring Love*). Bollas’ observations return us to our central question: to put it bluntly, does a repetition terminate? Repetition presents a force of continuity, so to charge it with the opposite force of termination is to raise some questions.

To elaborate them, let us resume our reading of Freud. Several terms are now vibrating together: creativity (especially literary creativity), repetition, termination (death), obsession. We are not sure repetition splits off so readily and so early from creativity, or that the deathliness and vitalism respectively underpinning them can simply be made opposites. Bollas, for instance, appears to hypostasise his terms into ideal

values, whereby creativity, life and freedom foster the Good; repetition, termination and unfreedom, the Bad. Freud too appears to keep things apart – or, more precisely, the work done in ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’ (1908 [1907]) never gets updated in the light of later writings, such as ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ (1920), which confound the opposition between life and death. But even in texts roughly contemporary with it, arguments are made which should unsettle or at least revise the creativity sketched out in ‘Creative Writers . . .’.

Take obsession. Is creativity not obsessive? Of course if we go by Christopher Bollas, obsession is the mortal enemy of creativity:

Pathological obsession is aimed at maintaining a terminal object that *ends* all unconscious use of the object: ideational, affective, somatic, or transference<sup>15</sup>.

That obsession is ‘bad’ is beyond debate, but in the paradoxical phrase, ‘maintaining a terminal object that *ends*’, our ambiguity resurfaces. The struggle between maintenance and termination, sustainment and ending, continues unabated, itself interminable. Bollas describes in this context a patient who for years keeps up a moan about her husband, obsessed with his shortcomings: the husband is the ‘terminal object’ she ‘maintains’. Clearly the woman has tapped a source of productive energy, and who is to adjudicate what kind of value it has? Is this not also an enduring love? And why would creative works not be ‘terminal objects’ that have kept their creator coming back obsessively to address and add to them?

In ‘Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis’ (1909), Freud begins by reviving his earlier definition of obsessive actions as

transformed self-reproaches which have re-emerged from repression and which always relate to some sexual act that was performed with pleasure in childhood.<sup>16</sup>

So much for that: now he wants to make some amendments. In keeping with the theory of disguise and distortion in the slightly earlier ‘Creative Writers . . .’ essay, Freud moves to mix ‘ellipsis’ into the constitution of obsession, for the ‘technique of distortion by ellipsis seems to be typical of obsessional neurosis’.<sup>17</sup> On the next page Freud adds the perhaps surprising qualification that ‘in obsessional neuroses the unconscious mental processes occasionally break through into consciousness in their pure and undistorted form’, but by and large he wishes now to log ellipsis among obsession’s specifications.

The amendment written in, obsession only comes the more to look like

creative writing. Where the literary ‘impulse’ issues in the covert and distorted presentation of a forbidden libidinal pleasure, obsession performs elliptical stagings of repressed infantile sexuality. The difference hardly rings out. They are, moreover, equally ‘formal’. Recall, this was already an aspect of literary creation in ‘Creative Writers . . .’; and Freud, though he does not emphasise this aspect of obsession in ‘Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis’ (1909), has already based another whole essay around it. ‘Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices’ (1907)<sup>18</sup> derived from the insight that the two phenomena discussed share a ceremonious formality; both are disciplines which as such observe certain rules. In fact all three – obsession, religion and literature – possess such vestimentary traits, the dressed-up, disciplined, artificial and coded tropings of a repressed sexuality. But despite the clear structural sameness that spans from obsessive action and religious practices to creative writing, Freud leaves it unsaid. Is he trying to protect something?

A further, more enigmatic element in the consanguinity of these forms takes the name of repetition, and in this we make another step towards the death instincts. Freud establishes the repetitiousness in religious practices and obsessive actions alike:

Any activities whatever may become obsessive actions in the wider sense of the term if they are elaborated by small additions or given a rhythmic character by means of pauses and repetitions. We shall not expect to find a sharp distinction between ‘ceremonials’ and ‘obsessive actions’.<sup>19</sup>

One can easily picture the apparatus of the Eucharist, for example, with its prescribed duties and utterances, its rhythmic programme and ‘automatic’ pattern, and see in it the institutionally approved version of neurotic behaviour obsessed with ritual, with laying things out, with formulaic words, with special clothing, etc. But we should take care in applying this model to literary forms, for a distinction applies, in respect of them, between a writer’s activities and the writing produced. Although we can just as readily imagine the writer going through a set procedure before commencing work (washing the hands, unplugging the phone, making coffee, repeating words of private exhortation, etc.), Freud’s earlier recognition of the role of aesthetic form directs us, in turn, towards the written. This is not to say the writer might not *also* be an obsessional neurotic who indulges in superstitious preparations, nor that his or her choice of form – the sonnet, say – does not, if repeated, provide a vehicle for personal obsession, but rather that . . .

– I was about to say that when Freud indicates the formal aspect of literary works, matters of genre are claiming his thoughts. But things are more complex. Let’s stick with sonnets. Although the sonnet constitutes

a ‘public’ form, a genre, a certifiably ‘literary’ mode, the writer who employs it thereby makes it his or her own. Conversely, the written sonnet – and it can only ever *be* written – equivocally remains public even in its private appropriation by an author, precisely because it is a form. And because it is a form it does not differ, fundamentally, from any supposedly ‘private’ ritual or form a writer may develop. Whether stamped as literary or not by prevailing norms, the form a writer selects will endlessly contest this private–public dilemma. Even the most esoteric form becomes, qua form, a repeatable event and, in this regard, potentially public. Likewise, if an obsession, to satisfy its criterion of repeatability, must solicit the ‘formal’, then it too suffers from the equivocation. Obsessive actions are no doubt personal – they even serve to ratify the alleged particularity of a given psyche – but their repeatability lends them a formal element which simultaneously takes them beyond that psyche’s exclusive ownership. The more obsessive one becomes, the more idiosyncratic, but also the more formal, the more theatrical, the more imitable, the more public. Obsession plays host to this intractable ambiguity, and insofar as the formal element of literary works may – and it always may – be abused for personal obsessive ends, those works will shelter the same ambiguity in their very form.

The ‘impersonal’ side of repetitious and formal obsession emerges in other works of Freud that deal with repetition proper. Earlier we quoted from ‘Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II)’ (1914), in explaining the relation between repression and expression. We heard Freud say that ‘[t]he greater the resistance, the more extensively will acting out (repetition) replace remembering’.<sup>20</sup> Now, as we have just seen, such repetitions can become elaborate and ritualised, even to the point of obsession. In fact, the greater the resistance or repression, the greater or ‘more extensive’ will the forms of expression become. To the extent they express the repressed in complexified or customised form, such repetitions can claim to be ‘original’ or ‘creative’ (even though, as we pointed out, that originality also evaporates through their very repetitiousness, which confers a formality that renders them standardised and ‘public’). But regardless of how bizarrely or originally a repetition may evolve, regardless of how creative or idiosyncratic a form it develops – and even regardless of, by contrast, how standardised, empty, public and borrowed the very same repetitions might always become – whatever the repetition is, it will always be intrinsically original, creative or deviant, in that it begins in disguise and displacement. Repetition is always already a trope. It tropes a wish which constitutionally it can never imitate, for such blatant presentation of the wish has

been forbidden, and repetition stems only from the prohibition. Never could it be orthodox, taking up its task rather as heretical, alternative, heterodox and always different from the repressed wish it tacitly porters along. Coming back to our sonnets, the sheer fact of a writer electing this literary form testifies in principle to a creative, original, eccentric or novel 'impulse', because chances are the form marks or masks the repetition of a wish, and the wish has long been deviated from, following an early obliquity. A repetition has to invent: not only will it have already done so merely by not stating the repressed wish directly, but continues to do so by settling on any literary form whatsoever. It doesn't matter if the form itself is hackneyed or pristine. Both merely accommodate the founding originality of a repetition, and neither affects it, thus making new-fangled literary forms ironically redundant.

None of this yet deals with the aforementioned impersonality of repetition, though it does touch on the grey area circumferenced by modern conceptions of 'the literary'. However else it may be characterised, today's 'literary' must meet the rival requirements to be both creative and 'aesthetic'. It has become a commonplace to note that, in demanding creativity and originality of a literary work, modern expectations reverse ancient, or at least medieval, ones which calculate the literariness of a given work from its level of acknowledgement of earlier authorities, thus its derivativeness. Because they seek, in addition to the 'original', to exact the aesthetic from pretenders to literary honour, the expectations can only seem unreasonable at first. At first, the inventively original and the generically formal (aesthetic) appear to be at odds. On closer scrutiny, as we have argued, they merge, and in the light of that scrutiny, we may conjecture that the modern criteria for literariness give voice to an unwitting demand for an object of undecidable status.

As for repetition 'proper', Freud has just given it the alternative name of 'acting out' ('[t]he greater the resistance, the more extensively will acting out (repetition) replace remembering'). The concept of acting out only amplifies the problems we are negotiating. Freud portrays the activity in the following terms:

The patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it.<sup>21</sup>

Something mechanical manipulates 'the patient'. A kind of robotic behaviour occurs, whence the 'impersonality' of repetition – but also the opposite. A psychic programming dictates the patient's actions but, *being* psychic, the programming occupies the most private chamber of the personality, its sanctum of authenticity, so to speak, even as it

commands these most inauthentic, dispossessed, absurd and puppet-like motions. A highly compromised being appears before us, disporting its unique personality in the contradictory mode of unstoppable autopoetic repetitions which seem to come from some anonymous factory of gestures. The unconscious is at work, in short. In witnessing its dramaturgy we revisit the dialectic of formality and obsession, only in more alienated aspect. Nothing if not repetitious, acting out too achieves formalisation, even to the point of turning its victims into automata; yet, in an agonising paradox, it remains *their* pathology. Repetition obdurately nurtures the internecine twins of private and public, authentic and mechanical, natural and technological, even human and inhuman.

Our affiliated concern was with the possibility or otherwise of *thinking* a form, of bringing anything conscious or original to bear upon the aesthetic form through which creativity demonstrates itself. In the aesthetic form of the sonnet, the creative effort at appropriating it and colouring it with originality triggered a proportionate expropriation. Subduing a form to conscious, original, thinking, intentional, personal control proved to be possible only to the extent it was also impossible. In acting out, the mediating, humanising, thinking moment of remembering gets bypassed, repetition rudely thrusts itself forward, a shell hollowed out of thought and intention. As with those of the obsessive, the actions played out, no matter how flagrant or contrived, will not be caught, normalised and translated into conscious psychic language, as it were. They press into the world uncouth. Not that in both acting out and obsession, some naked ‘trauma’ gets pushed on stage: on the contrary, obsession depends, as we have seen, on elliptical figurations, just as the repetition in acting out repeats not a trauma *per se* but the form of its first reactive, disguised repression (though in the quotation above Freud has relaxed his rigour on this point). It is these convoluted repetitions which their subject fails to think or ‘remember’ in any cognisant fashion, despite their conspicuous weirdness. The logic of it even suggests that the odder the behaviour, the less noticeable to its subject – which can only be because the form counts more than the content. In other words, the logic supports itself with the truism that ‘the patient’ – the subject, the obsessive, the priest, the creator, the writer – ceases to apprehend what he or she repeats. Repetition can make a normality of the most aberrant or recondite actions, the form having either numbed all apperception of the content or, more interestingly, commuted each item of content into a moment of itself – a moment of form, that is. In the latter case, the ‘form’ of the Eucharist would pervade its contents, so that no word (‘This is my body . . .’) nor any item (chalice, wine, wafer, etc.) would

represent a content distinguishable from the formal make-up of the ceremony; and in the case of the sonnet, not only would the shape of the poem constitute 'form', obviously enough, but so would each line, as if susurrating 'I am the *n*th line of a sonnet', and even each word, though varying from sonnet to sonnet and thus creating the impression of content, might be heard to whisper, 'I am the *n*th word in the *n*th line of a sonnet' . . .

But perhaps formal elements *cannot* be thought. Worse than merely becoming dulled and negligible through repetition, forms, such as aesthetic forms, may be impossible to think *tout court*. Acting out might describe the general as much as the pathological condition of repetition. Perhaps it's not merely *possible* to repeat without understanding, but necessary: repetition kicks in where the understanding falters. We repeat *because* we do not understand. Thus formal elements win their aesthetic quality by overleaping their creator's cognitive mediation of them. After all, such mediation spells their death. Literary form becomes, technically, unthinkable. And when it opts for such a form, the creative act turns into the thoughtless facilitation of a cosmetic object, literariness the effect of suppressing reflection on it.

Though all this makes for a somewhat scandalous theory of creativity, nothing in it disputes the basic proposition that creativity does indeed create. Where there was nothing, now there is something. Even when 'create' really means 're-create', the re-creations fill an erstwhile gap. Even though the creativity falls short of its former freedom and intentionality, nevertheless literary and other aesthetic works *are created*: in the absence of untrammelled 'creativity', creations still arise. I want to come back to the nothingness that precedes a creative act, but for now the sheer 'thereness' of a so-called creative repetition demands some comment. How did it come to be there? We have exposed the perplexities of its production, the trajectory from wish to repression to deceiving representation, etc., but not substantially interrogated what makes creative repetitions happen.

To enjoy the fruit of Freud's own reflections on this question, we must consult a new source, further on again in the chronology of his essays. In 'The Uncanny' (1919) Freud deepens the character of repetition, introducing a phrase, 'compulsion to repeat', which bears a significance well beyond the essay's topic:

It is possible to recognise the dominance in the unconscious mind of a 'compulsion to repeat' proceeding from the instinctual impulses and probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts – a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character.<sup>22</sup>

A “compulsion to repeat”, then, in the middle of this extraordinarily thought-provoking statement. We are now in the immediate neighbourhood of death. Why are repetitions made? Because of a compulsion. We already knew there was a wish and that it industriously found ways – sometimes very roundabout ways – of gratifying itself in ‘repetitions’, and that literary works number among these. Now we also know what drives it, to wit: compulsion.

Painful to say, the notion of compulsion both does and does not further our understanding of the wish as the instrument of the pleasure principle. On the one hand, compulsion takes us further into the psyche, beyond the mere psychology of the wish, into the archaic and, as Freud will later contend, *phylogenetic* nest of the instincts. From this point of view the ‘compulsion to repeat’ becomes almost visceral in its functioning, as hard to arrest by conscious will as a heartbeat. On the other hand, since it is a *wish* that pilots repetition, ‘compulsion’ has already been factored in, for a wish is arguably self-compelling by nature. As *wishful*, the wish knows nothing but motivation, solicitation, identification and so on, incapable of rest. The wish does nothing but compel itself.

Either way – whether it precedes or accompanies the wish –, *there is compulsion*. At this stage in Freud’s career (1919), we can say no more; he hasn’t yet advanced an explanation for the compulsion at hand. Insofar as literary and other aesthetic works provide the formal receptacles for repetitions, they too will have been compelled. The wish had to have its way, its compulsive energy relentless in the pursuit of a compromised way round repression. It repeats itself, misunderstood by its agent, in forms which though diverse – aesthetic, obsessive, religious, acting out – enjoy a structural affinity, and it goes on repeating itself, never visiting the consciousness which might find the lever to shut it down. Once again it would be arbitrary to call such energy *either* creative *or* oppressively monotonous. As in the case of Jed Parry in McEwan’s novel, it is both. Compulsion offers a more powerful concept than either the creativity or the monotony it may interpretatively be split into.

Freud’s explanation of it arrives in the text that has been our golden thread throughout this book, that published the following year, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ (1920). So far we have conceived repetitions, particularly of the aesthetic variety, as the far-flung, elaborated or ‘disseminative’ sallies from a repressed wish that has been condensed and displaced: distance inheres in them. The 1920 paper indirectly adjusts this conception. The compulsion to repeat now serves, as we know, ‘*a need to restore an earlier state of things*'.<sup>23</sup> This might *prima facie* look like Hanna Segal’s ‘impulse [...] to recover and recreate [a] lost world’ (see above), especially given the imprecision of that word ‘impulse’. But

where Segal identifies a psychological anteriority, Freud's attentions have turned again, as in 'The Uncanny' (1919), to the antepsychological realm of the instincts. The '*earlier state*' is much earlier, in short. For all its diversifications and satellites, all the apparent remoteness of its forms, repetition always steers a homeward course towards the instincts. The regionality of its expressions is false. Whatever distance they pretend to have travelled has always already bent back to a prior, nearer location, the innermost of the mind. Indeed the innerness is so inwards it has backed through the individual psyche into a phylogenetic past. The intrepid creativity of repetitions could not be more conservative.

In this conservatism lies the kernel of Freud's conception. As it seeks at large the pleasure on which to sate itself (often obliged to light on pathological forms as removed from it as literary works), the wish actually craves the *alleviation of tension* which pleasure affords. Freud's essay opens summarily with:

In the theory of psychoanalysis we have no hesitation in assuming that the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle. We believe, that is to say, that the course of those events is invariably set in motion by an unpleasurable tension, and that it takes a direction such that its final outcome coincides with a lowering of that tension – that is, with an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure.<sup>24</sup>

Armed thus with his theory, Freud feels emboldened to make the inference that the pleasure principle serves the death instincts, for the state of absolute tranquillity sought from pleasure amounts to the inertia of death. Freud likens it to the extinction of a Buddhist nirvana. And insofar as the death instincts therefore lord it over the pleasure principle, they converge with the compulsion to repeat which, as Freud noted in 'The Uncanny' (1919) (see above), is a 'compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle'. The deathliness of repetition reveals itself at last.

It might be tempting to try and capture Freud's schema in the net of a dialectic, but this would be vain. Repetition tilts between the creative and the monotonous. Impressively creative or flamboyant in its choice of forms, forms which in principle may be as orchidaceous and 'aesthetic' as you like, repetition nevertheless drags along the same old wish repressed. Is there a dialectic of identity and difference here? I think not. For a start, any such dialectic could at best be secondary, considering that, as we remarked before, repetitions start off as inventive, coming into existence as improvisatory salvos and, in that, *remaining* inventive, whatever takes place down the line, sameness or variation. But more gravely, the mastery of the death instincts subsumes any dialecticity in the play of

repetition into its own overarching, monolithic and irresistible force. Pleasure's station is not as a partner-in-identity-and-difference for the death instincts, but as its servant. And if that makes us rush to Hegel to help us say that, 'well, if pleasure is the servant of death, and death is pleasure's lord, then the dialectic of power described in *Phenomenology of Spirit* has reappeared . . .', we should pause. For death and pleasure to join together in the *pas-de-deux* of a dialectic, they would have to dance to the same measure. The absolute contemporaneity of the two partners sustains all dialectical substitution; there is no time-difference in dialectics. Not only are both partners quite present to each other, but dialectics consists in the effort to comprehend their simultaneity. Death and pleasure, by contrast, inhabit either a dyschronic field, or separate eras which touch. As we noted, the death instincts recede into an archaic past, which Freud now identifies as that of the simple organism. The wish, and the pleasure principle that governs it, bear an anachronistic relation to the death instincts, as the rebeginning, now in the human species, of an urge for stillness under the more perspicuous superstructure of the psyche.

A kind of aesthetic double-time develops. No matter the psychical vestments worn by aesthetic repetitions, no matter, that is, how expressively they belong to the time of an individual psyche – how far they are the accents of its very modernity – the shadow of an ancient deathliness falls over them. The inaccessible wake of death, both in time and out of time, conditions the aesthetic present while staying ulterior to it. At the very least, the situation restages the problem of the non-individual character of the psyche. It's not just that forms 'creatively' elected by the individual psyche refuse to be subjugated by the private consciousness, but that the death which lays its moon-like light over them ushers them into a past of inassimilable otherness and generality. This older time of the aesthetic object pulls it into at best a phylogenetic ancestry which, though badged as 'metapsychological', has little to do with psychological continuity, and at worst a nameless organicism. But even if we disregard such Freudian arcana, the aesthetic object still snags on a temporal split that prevents its ideal presence-to-self.

Before taking these Freudianisms forward to consider more specifically literary questions, particularly as generated by Leo Bersani and Jacques Derrida from their reading of Freud, let us head off some potential confusion and do so by drawing again on Timothy Clark.

Eliciting the implications for creativity of Nietzsche's notion of the 'Dionysian', Clark writes that:

'Dionysian' creativity, freed from the service of 'higher' values, and become its own end and object, forms a notion of self-creation and re-creation that is,

necessarily, also continuously annihilating. Ultimately, it is indistinguishable from a transgressive death-drive: ‘The genius – in his works, in his deeds – is necessarily a prodigal: his greatness lies in the fact that *he expends himself* . . . The instinct of self-preservation is as it were suspended.’ [Nietzsche]<sup>25</sup>

Two remarks here. First: the ‘transgressive death-drive’ and ‘[t]he instinct of self-preservation’ are taken to be adversaries. No doubt this agrees with common sense, but in Freud the pair are not only not hostile, they are intrinsically at one. The Freudian death-drive aims at just such preservation, by warding off exterior threat, *including* the threat which pleasure, as an experience of agitation, presents; only if it secures its own relief will ‘pleasure’ be countenanced. ‘Death-drive’ is something of a misnomer for this function. ‘Preservation drive’ or ‘reduction drive’ would be more apposite. The Freudian death-drive warrants the adjective ‘annihilating’ only to the limited degree that (1) it carries in its undertow a pleasure principle that smothers or deflects anything disturbing the psychic placidity it protects; (2) it sets its sights on such pared-down placidity, wooing a near-nothing, though strictly this speaks less of a nihilism on its part than a metapsychological minimalism – which sparks a methodological crisis over where to halt the regress of placidity (Freud resorts to recalibrating it at the degree almost-zero of the simple organism). Perversely, the death-drive works on behalf of perpetuity, not destruction, and a perpetuity extending both backwards and forwards in time: backwards because a prehistoric past irresistibly beckons it, forwards *because* perpetual. Nothing in Freud really dies: it either lies dormant or – what amounts to the same thing – reintegrates and survives through the hugely powerful processes of memory and memorialisation, processes in which annihilation or pure loss are never allowed to tear holes.

Second: the meaning of death as perpetuity welds it to notions of creation. Both death-drive and wish suddenly buzz with the concentrated energy of continuance, like a sun in eclipse, providing the source of all ‘creative’ activity. Such energy for creation is a far cry from that trumpeted by Nietzsche, who credits a psychological self-determinism as the ground of creativity that will be denied the Freudian writer. The latter finds him- or herself dwarfed by a metapsychological cosmos, any personal psychology, even where it manages some self-determinism, rendered ineffectual by the chthonic imperatives of death manoeuvring it.

We shall do well to remember the meta- or post-psychological phase of psychoanalysis as we begin our descent towards the literary. But nor ought we so peremptorily to dismiss Nietzsche from the discussion. ““The genius – in his works, in his deeds – is necessarily a prodigal: his greatness lies in the fact that *he expends himself* . . . The instinct of self-

preservation is as it were suspended””: ‘genius’ might prove an equally fruitful term with which to configure the literary, but the notion of prodigality or expenditure is what we shall take up. Let us straightforwardly put it into tension with a remark concerning the death-drive made by Jacques Derrida:

According to a schema that never ceased to guide Freud’s thought, the movement of the trace is described as an effort of life to protect itself by *deferring* the dangerous investment, by constituting a reserve (*Vorrat*).<sup>26</sup>

It is all a question of how much energy, psychic or otherwise, gets used by creativity, and where it comes from. In Nietzsche, the (creative) genius expends himself, suggesting cavalier self-destruction, but the expenditure is temporary or recoverable, and therefore phoney, each frenzied outpouring only a *petit mort* which can bank on being replenished. Despite its kamikaze recklessness, such psychic orgasm contains itself within what Derrida would call a ‘restricted economy’, that of the individual mind; we should have to go to Nietzsche’s theories of history to see daylight within this otherwise closed system. Derrida specifically lays the charge of ‘restricted economy’ at Freud’s door, and it informs the quotation above. In emphasising the ‘reserve’ built by the Freudian psyche, Derrida wants to indict the latter for a self-recuperating ideality (along similar lines as his critique of Hegelian dialectics, *inter alia*). In this view, Freudian expenditure would also be phoney. As we were saying, no loss worth the name inheres in the so-called death-drive.

And yet the Freudian psyche achieves less continuity with itself than Derrida would have it. Derrida’s sureness of the homogeneity of the (Freudian) psychic dimension in which detours are made fails to account for the possible or quasi-heterogeneity of its phylogenetic past, which, as we noted, causes a temporal rift and a concomitant loss of psychic presence-to-self. Interestingly, this does not prevent Derrida from envisioning a similar conclusion reached via a different route. He asks:

How are we to think *simultaneously*, on the one hand, *différance* as the economic detour which, in the element of the same, always aims at coming back to the pleasure or presence that have been deferred by (conscious or unconscious) calculation, and, on the other hand, *différance* as the relation to an impossible presence, as expenditure without reserve, as the irreparable loss of presence, the irreversible usage of energy, that is, as the death instinct, and as the entirely other relationship that apparently interrupts every economy?<sup>27</sup>

As far as Freudian psychology goes, Derrida’s construction of the ‘economic detour’ calls for no objection. But it appears to us that ‘*différance* as the relation to an impossible presence’ already troubled the Freudian

psyche in the form of its own phylogenetic – that is, metapsychological – debt. True, the metapsychological ‘*différence*’ (if we can call it that) of the Freudian death instinct does not function – *expressly* does not function – as ‘expenditure without reserve, [...] the irreparable loss of presence, the irreversible usage of energy’, but then Derrida’s courting of so refined an absence looks as idealised as the psychic totality he wishes to disaggregate. On the other hand, metapsychological ‘*différence*’, even if it pertains to an extrapsychic energy (that of phylogenetics) and thereby pollutes the homogeneity of the psychic dimension, pertains to an ‘absent’ form that *will have been present* and has therefore never been ‘impossible’.

It is important to exempt the radical vacuity inscribed in Derridean ‘*différence*’ from any talk of nihilism or annihilation such as we have been party to. If the alleged nihilism in Nietzsche rather fed the creative faculty than killed it, all the more so in Derrida where ‘*différence*’, at first sight so privative, is gifted with an almost transcendental generativity. By stymieing presence, ‘*différence*’ allows it to break from itself and go forward, to defer itself by differing from itself: that is, become temporalised. Time has to deconstruct itself, lose itself to keep itself. The very possibility of presence – of all that ‘is’ – depends upon its own cancellation, revealing ‘*différence*’ as the most productive force conceivable. So when Derrida, in the second half of his sentence (‘on the other hand, *différence* as the relation to an impossible presence [...]’) brings in the death-drive (‘expenditure without reserve, [...] the irreparable loss of presence, the irreversible usage of energy, that is, [...] the death instinct’), an extremely ambivalent phenomenon emerges. If the death-drive answers to ‘*différence*’, its economic interfuses with an *aneconomic*, character. Instead of the death-drive merely colluding with the pleasure principle (and the reality principle) in a system which postpones pleasure in order to reclaim it later, thereby achieving an overall balance, now that system has a bug in it which impedes its (economic) closure, and thus even the possibility of balance. The bug is ‘*différence*’ which enjoins upon the presence of the present-pleasure-to-be-deferred an absolute loss in principle. The (present) pleasure may indeed be recouped later but only after exiting the system altogether (nor waiting in the sidelines in some virtual system either), and only as incomplete even then. We are beyond all expenditure here. But that same loss will also, through a kind of ultimate risk, create the conditions for all deferral and continuation. ‘*Différence*’ has the peculiar ability to be generative in lieu of any ‘reserve’ from which to generate: but then having no reserve also means observing no limit. In one respect, ‘*différence*’ is absolute creativity.

In this Derridean view, the death-drive succeeds in an affirmative

productivity sorely lacking, in the eyes of many commentators, in its Freudian configuration. Witness Leo Bersani:

What has been repressed from the speculative second half of Freud's text ['Beyond the Pleasure Principle'] is sexuality as productive masochism. The possibility of exploiting the shattering effects of sexuality in order to maintain the tensions of an eroticised, de-narrativised, and mobile consciousness has been neglected, or refused, in favour of a view of pleasure as nothing more than the reduction of all tension and the evacuation of all excitement.<sup>28</sup>

Bersani's appeal, powered it seems by a belated Nietzscheanism of its own, for a 'sexuality as productive masochism', raises the good question of why indeed Freud does not permit the death instinct to profit from the energy of the masochism it resembles. I examined that question in the Chapter 3 above, 'A Subject is Being Beaten'; here we want to get on board Bersani's relocating of it in the context of the literary (his reading of 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' has been inspired by that of Derrida whose initiative it was to track the strategies of the text's movement).<sup>29</sup> For Bersani something else is going on in Freud's description of the death-drive, rather different from our ideas of aesthetic form, that relates profoundly to 'the literary' and concerns precisely its 'productivity'.

For Bersani, a special energy crackles behind the death-drive, which Freud is remiss in overlooking. Its character is erotic, and Bersani finds fault with Freud for compacting it into its own antonym, 'the evacuation of all excitement'. Bersani then augments his position: not by extrapolating or refuting Freudian concepts, but by tracing the contours of Freud's rhetoric. He believes the hesitations, solecisms and vaguenesses in Freud's text are the symptoms of this other energy, and he treats them as exemplary, no less, of the general functioning of literary language. He proposes that:

The linguistic categories of pleasure, reality, sexuality, and death can, at the most, be 'related to', or 'inferred from' or 'correspond to' [Bersani here mocking Freud's logical and terminological imprecision in 'Beyond . . .'] a certain type of insistence in consciousness which *it is the function of linguistic articulation to miss*. And we should perhaps recognise in what, with necessary imprecision, has been called 'literary language' the intrusion of these insistent, silent, productively mistaken replications into a text's line of language. These replications can be verbally rendered only by such events as the sliding of the word 'pleasure' in Freud's text, or the indeterminate placing of sexuality in the instinctual conflict between life and death.<sup>30</sup>

The more vulnerable language becomes to 'the intrusion of these insistent, silent, productively mistaken replications', the more literary. The

intrusion evidences an eroticised deathliness which knows only such ‘mistaken replications’ as a means of propagating itself into the phenomenal and aesthetic world. Ironically, language approaches literariness the more it divests itself of articulacy, its growing maladroitness the outward sign of a culture of erotic death parasitically besieging it from within. The literary comprises telling lacunae created by the absence to articulation of sex and death which nevertheless indelibly underwrite the literary process. Literature is an effect of the withdrawn presence of the death-drive.

Promising though these suggestions are, we should withhold full approval, for they might only rehabilitate what E. R. Curtius has classified as literature’s ‘inexpressibility topoi’.<sup>31</sup> ‘Literariness’ in Bersani’s perspective still trades on the illusion of an inexpressible presence: as he insists, ‘*it is the function of linguistic articulation to miss*’ these thanatographic incursions. The ineffable is present to the extent it cannot be presented. Though Bersani reinvents the literary as its incompetent vessel rather than its technically skilful or artistic formalisation, the ineffable signified still reigns supreme, and that incompetence under the sway of an importunate writing force (the death instincts) makes Bersani’s design look like another form of automatic writing.

Despite Bersani’s exasperation with, and revision of, Freud, the inaccessible repetitiousness of death in literary form, and the possibility that literature repeats ‘nothing’, remain in broad accordance with the master’s views. As with Freud, no room exists in the literary artifact for content. To be more precise, content has significance only, at bottom, as a form or mode of the death-drive, and in this regard ‘the literary’ says nothing, it never posits for itself, it just lets the death-drive drive it (where it does say something, it gives over being literary). Which puts a new spin on an oft-cited remark of Derrida’s concerning literature: ‘The space of literature is not only that of an instituted *fiction* but also a *fictive institution* which in principle allows one to say everything.’<sup>32</sup> From time to time literature might run up against censorship, but external constraint will not vitiate its ‘principle’ in the right to ‘say everything’. Fictive by birth, literature abounds in an ignorance of all boundaries to the sayable. And by extension, it need never posit anything. Yes, it may do so – a literary work may incorporate positive data, empirical description, factual information, and so on – but it never has to; it is just as literary, even more so, when it dispenses with positive statements.<sup>33</sup> Free of the obligation to posit, literature intrinsically says nothing. In other words, saying nothing and the licence to say everything amount to the same.

So much for productivity when all that gets produced are sweet nothings. Bersani ends up reinstating the emptiness he decried in Freud.

Though he salvages the tension of unrelieved eros from the death-drive, and exhorts it to destabilise linguistic processes the more to make them literary, what results are deathly gaps in articulation, as aphasic and dumb as they are salutary and vital. In a very general sense this might supply the ‘masochism’ Bersani petitions for, but is hardly ‘productive’ in any redoubtable way. Besides, there never was a contradiction in Freud, as we have seen, between creativity and death.

On the subject of masochism, let us remind ourselves that although the death instincts permeate the literary artifact to its superficial core, it feels no pain. Quite the reverse. In our reading of Freud, literary form – and what would a literature without form be? – perpetrates a repetitiousness that defensively keeps all upset at a minimum equivalent to ‘pleasure’ (or at least its effect). The deportment of the literary, its ‘style’, is apotropaic by nature: the style protects as much as it adorns, its flamboyant garb also an armour (indeed the word ‘ornament’ comes from a Latin source meaning ‘armour’). This dual aspect of literary style receives its subtlest rendition in a Derridean text ‘on’ Nietzsche that alludes everywhere to Freud. Elliptical itself, Derrida’s essay compresses thus the features of literary style:

In the question of style there is always the weight or *examen* of some pointed object. At times this object might be only a quill or a stylus. But it could just as easily be a stiletto, or even a rapier. Such objects might be used in a vicious attack against what philosophy appeals to in the name of matter or matrix, an attack whose thrust could not but leave its mark, could not but inscribe there some imprint or form. But they might also be used as protection against the threat of such an attack, in order to keep it at a distance, to repel it – as one bends or recoils before its force, in flight, behind veils and sails (*des voiles*). But let us leave this elytron to float between the masculine and the feminine.<sup>34</sup>

Literary style averts the philosophical ‘matter or matrix’. Working complementarily to ‘*différance*’ in its perforation of the present pleasure, the literary ‘stiletto’ inserts the ‘distance’ of a ‘*différance*’-like loss that Derrida will later redescribe in terms of castration. As we were at pains to stress, the loss pertains to no entity; the distance defers no plenary pleasure; no secret essence hides in the background; no transcendental signified or ineffable presence of the ilk rehearsed by Bersani. In its gesture, style attacks as it defends, ‘masculine’ in its ‘femininity’ – though the metaphorical value of these terms breaks down in a schema devoid of the essence, truth or literalism in which metaphor might refind its origin. Hence the ‘elytron’ floats.

As in Freud, literary ‘style’ consists in the forces of pleasure and pain, principally in the mode of their own deferral, except that Derrida

appears to rule out any sensuous, psychological or metapsychological affect such forces bore in their Freudian format. Lacking any entity or origin to displace, style is nothing but pure deferral or distance, which is as much to say as style is nothing. Crucially, however, that nothing has a 'form' in the literal instrumentality of the style, and its divorced supplementarity to the psyche. It's less that Derrida rules out the sensuous, psychological or metapsychological affect, and more that he heeds a break in the continuum from psyche to literary artefact, which seems never to have occurred to Freud, despite the latter's awareness of 'form'. Style is not the man, style is the style – a graphic discontinuity in and of the psyche, which curtails the latter's absolute rule over the aesthetic field it thought to have determined. That leaves space for the implements of style – the quills, stilettos, rapiers and bodkins which Derrida inventories – to enact an 'automatism' of their own. Creativity thus discovers a new 'source'. If 'style' brings on the destruction, both offensive and defensive, of the present pleasure it might have otherwise simply deferred, that pleasure and the wish straining after it can no longer support the forays of literary practice as they did in Freud. Literary style avails itself of a post-psychical independence. But in so doing, style also crashes, for where it was wont to vouch for the singularity of both its author and itself through the medium of a psychical conduit back to that author, now the psychical reference-point has gone and with it the chance of style staving itself into some singularity. Style, the voice of singularity, has turned plural – and lost its style.

Through Derrida we have encountered a second demand to loosen the literary from its too humanistic or 'post-Romantic' moorings, identify energies of creativity other than those of the individual psyche, and thus tolerate what is separate or alien about the literary. It may be that the literary – indeed any creative work – deserves to be called aesthetic only when it has seceded from psychical ordnance. In the first view, by looking into Freud's notion of aesthetic form, we saw the literary mutate from private to public and develop separate status. Albeit pathological in origin, the literary adopted a form that necessarily took it away from pathology, according to a logic which Freud, being committed to the universality of psyche, could not entertain. For Freud literary style defers a pleasure and a pain within a psychical dimension that is more or less homogeneous, depending on how far phylogenetics belongs to it; for Derrida literary style defers something more radical, the very condition of possibility of pleasure, namely presence. Such is the destruction that precedes creation that we mentioned above. In both cases (though of the two only Derrida would assent) style breaks free. And although Freud does not address style *per se*, it falls to the same logic. Aesthetic

forms are forms of repetition, as we showed, which led to their ‘independence’. The same goes for literary style. Style needs to be repeated to become identifiable as such. A style that ‘happens’ only once has not yet become a style. In repeating itself style is already becoming a form, and, like a form, becoming susceptible to expropriation. Long before any Derridean analysis of it, style suffers from the paradox in ownership and singularity. Artifacts of style are again only as creative as they are monotonous.

But we cannot leave it at that. We must not confuse the separateness of the literary artifact with a discrete, bordered, framed unity: it may be independent, but it isn’t enclosed. Freud talks about forms, the empiricism of which could easily stop us thinking through the implications of expropriation. In principle, a literary artifact even of the most integral empirical form (the sonnet again!) will have had to jeopardise its singularity through becoming public, a process which distorts and ruins it; it will have given itself away in the most ‘disseminative’ fashion in order to win itself back in tidy, consensual shape. In Derrida it gets worse, because no empiricism comes along to validate this or that ‘aesthetic’ object. With the literary stylus causing rents in the fabric of presence, all ‘form’ as the collected moments of aesthetic presence becomes impossible. There may be an aesthetic territory for the literary but it no longer coincides with any empirical boundary, especially where that boundary corresponds to an author’s psyche, for the literary takes off from the excision of all psychism. The ‘space of literature’ extends chaotically in all directions, flouting the borders between one psyche and the next, one author and the next, making ‘style’ the property of the force of writing itself, and preventing us from matching it conclusively to the form of any aesthetic (empirical) object, literary or otherwise (the classification ‘literary’ has no more distinctness than any other).

Whichever way you look at it, the literary implements deferral. A certain obliquity, and therefore a certain temporality, a certain stratagem, a certain rhetoric, carry it ever wayward. In this respect, even Freud and Derrida uphold a tradition. True, Freud adjudges literary artifacts to have risen above the pathologies touching them and saturating other ‘formal’ practices, but as we have seen, it is arbitrary to do so: the literary is just as perverse as those other practices. And Derrida will elsewhere release the viral energy of the literary into the sanitised space of philosophy, causing philosophy to express a secret delinquency the literary always flaunted – but the literary is still seen *as* delinquent. Both Freud and Derrida keep the literary in its Platonic place as unorthodox and abnormal, even though they appear to overturn the Platonic evaluation of the literary as ‘bad’. It is indisputably errant.

The trouble is, its own errancy too often incites the persecution of the literary back to an origin, to counter the authority of this thing which in speaking so much, and ever more copiously, still says nothing – and indeed gains its authority *from* this allusive emptiness. Like death, the literary is all the more powerful for creating the illusion of a substance or content it can never adduce. And indeed such mystificatory authority cannot simply be accepted. The drifting verbosity of the literary has nothing to do with babble, however, or ‘stream of consciousness’, for its drift, its errancy, its obliquity and ellipses are made up of formal elements, like gaudy jewellery. In the becoming-formal lies the element of the literary’s power, but the formalisation does not bring rectitude; it like an ideological apparatus, institutes an aberration. This aberration is dressed up as everything, but is nothing. Repeat: nothing.

### Notes

1. *SE*, IX, p. 144.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 146.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
5. *SE*, XII, p. 151.
6. Timothy Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 2.
7. Hanna Segal, *Dream, Phantasy and Art* (London and New York: Tavistock/Routledge, 1991), p. 94. The quotation comes from a chapter which considers Freud’s ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
10. Timothy Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 9.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
12. Christopher Bollas, *Cracking Up: The Work of Unconscious Experience* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 5.
13. On p. 155 Bollas develops the point: ‘If the ego appreciates the individual’s sense, then there is an intrasubjective sensitivity; I think that poets, painters, musicians, and others engaged in creative work feel pleasure in their ego’s contribution to this separate sense [. . .] Creativity in unconscious work responds to any audience delegated by the self.’
14. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
16. *SE*, X, p. 221.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
18. *SE*, IX, pp. 115–27.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

20. See note 5 above.
21. *SE*, XII, p. 150.
22. *SE*, XVII, p. 238.
23. *SE*, XVIII, p. 57.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
25. Timothy Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 179.
26. Jacques Derrida, 'Différance', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), p. 18.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
28. Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 63–4.
29. Jacques Derrida, 'To Speculate – on "Freud"', in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 257–409.
30. Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 66.
31. See Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), pp. 159–62.
32. Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, trans. various (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 36.
33. For elaboration of this point, see my 'Licence', in *Poetry and Politics*, ed. Kate Flint (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1996), pp. 140–61.
34. Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles/Éperons: Les Styles de Nietzsche*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 37–9.

# A Harmless Suggestion

There is nothing new under the sun. (Heraclitus)

‘So foul and fair a day I have not seen’: Macbeth’s first words invoke, from the start, a coextensiveness of benefit and harm that will dominate the remainder of his foreshortened life. The ‘day’, a semi-objective correlative for his own destiny, will be foul and fair in equal measure. What will make him will also destroy him, giving him advantage only to the degree that it scuppers him too. As Macbeth is magnified, so he disintegrates, like a photographic blow-up.

Within seconds the Thane of Glamis finds himself swept into the orbit of suggestion. The witches appear. The third witch cries, ‘All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter!’ Prophecy and suggestion hold hands like witches, collusive and indistinguishable. Are the witches revealing to Macbeth a truth, a transcendental knowledge of which they are the medium, known out there in the cosmos but as yet undelivered to Macbeth himself? Do we see here a trope or *topos* of revelation? Or, by contrast, are the witches giving voice not to an exterior verity but to Macbeth’s own inner thoughts? The witches might be Manichean projections from Macbeth’s mind, hallucinations like that of the fantasmatic dagger later on, or they might be independent or hired agents with a remit to expose his secrets, but in either case the ‘truth’ they announce will not be new, not an invention but a discovery, a truth, therefore, that lay already within Macbeth. So the question is: is the prophecy news to Macbeth?

Much *Macbeth* scholarship, of course, has been exercised by this question, to ascertain how far the witches merely express what Macbeth was already wishing versus how far they plant the wish in his mind. Is this new news to the Thane of Glamis or the old news of a repressed – or at least suppressed – wish on his part? One cannot help thinking that the question would have been resolved by now if it were resolvable. The

question is not local to *Macbeth*, for it concerns the nature of prophecy; the line, if there is one, between prophecy and suggestion; the relationship between suggestion and the identity of the suggestible party; finally, the connection between the power of suggestion and the suggestion of power – ideological temptations, as it were. These more general issues are the ones I explore in what follows, and they all, as I shall try to show, come down to the question of death. But as a preliminary salvo, and in a challenge to the college of *Macbeth* scholars, let me first isolate a prejudice.

The scholarly debate works on the prejudice or assumption that, be Macbeth ‘innocent’ or ‘guilty’ of harbouring quietly the ambition broadcast so loud and clear by the witches, he nevertheless is there, in situ, as its object or subject. A Macbeth-identity precedes the scene, albeit in fictional form. This may be true, but it is worth testing, and not least because of Macbeth’s own advertisement as to his undoing. Recall the words he speaks the scene after his fateful encounter with the witches:

My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,  
Shakes so my single state of man that function  
Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is  
But what is not.<sup>1</sup>

These much-glossed lines say to me that in the wake of the weird sisters’ appearance, speculation has so taken over from reality in Macbeth’s mind that the substance of his experience has become insubstantial. Only what is not, is. The opposite of ‘is’, the opposite of presence, being or substance, has come to invade his every faculty, shaking his single state of man. However, this opposite of ‘is’ is not inexistence or death, exactly. ‘[W]hat is not’ works as a metaphor for the future as that realm of the ‘fantastical’; since the future ‘is not’, by definition, its status is speculative. Neither is there a present presence for Macbeth nor quite a future presence, because that future, being future, cannot have such a presence yet except through anticipation, and anticipation is incapable of conferring substance upon it. Living neither in the present, because he is too consumed by speculation, nor in the future, because the future doesn’t exist, Macbeth lives strangely out of time while completely enslaved to its rule and paradoxes. He rides time from the outside, as if clinging on, like De Quincey’s pariah, to a stagecoach.

What results is a paralysis or inertia not dissimilar to that of Prince Hamlet, whereby ‘function / Is smothered in surmise’, in a ghastly prefiguring of the nocturnal asphyxiation and stabbing of the king – the ‘murder’ that ‘yet is but fantastical’. The physical and the metaphysical parallel each other, but at a distance, with Macbeth trapped in the yoke

between them, pulling them together and simultaneously pushing them far apart. Paradoxically, the anticipation of action becomes the enemy of action – better then not to think or speculate at all because to do so is to shake the single state of man, to smother function, and thus to put one's being in peril. The more Macbeth anticipates the death of the other (the king) the more he brings his own shaking, his own smothering – his own death, in effect – closer to himself. Thus the speculative mutates into its opposite, and creates a real threat. At one level, 'surmise', speculation and anticipation will 'smother' action by delaying it, but at another – where the word 'smothered' connects Macbeth to Duncan, just as the 'single state of man' metaphor is unmistakeably monarchical, alluding among other things to Duncan's position as state incarnate in a single man (monarchy) – the action is already happening, and already happening not to Duncan, but Macbeth himself. A complex interchange of identity between the two parties operates in these lines – even the phrase 'what is not' signifies 'Macbeth as king' but in such a way as to hint at death ('is not'), while the word 'is' picks up on the 'is' at the end of the preceding line, which refers implicitly to Duncan (not to mention the complication whereby 'shakes' alludes to the author). Because key words stand for both parties, Macbeth cannot refer to Duncan's death without 'referring' to his own. More precisely, Macbeth refers to himself as (the murdered) Duncan; he has only to refer to 'himself', therefore, to multiply the risk to himself inordinately, suicide and murder matching each other step for step. The action to which speculation leads backfires upon its agent: speculation doesn't just smother action, it also 'pricks' it as Lady Macbeth will say, and pricks it in a pricking way, causing its perpetrator harm. In short, 'surmise' both postpones and expedites action, but it also distorts the field it takes place in, causing uncontrollable and hazardous reversals of identity.

That is the first reason for doubting the integrity of Macbeth's identity, but is only the tip of the iceberg: it derives from a more primary reason that goes back to the scene of prophecy and suggestion with the witches, which derives in turn from a wish. The origin of Macbeth's dangerous surmise lay with the witches' prophecy. By the time he speaks the lines just quoted the prophecy has been framed as Macbeth's 'thought' – 'My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical'. The thought contains a picture of Macbeth as king in Duncan's place, though as we have said it remains an open question whether the witches gave him that picture or whether he already possessed it. Being the force that impels the confusion of metaphors and identities in Macbeth's speech, that thought has more power than either. As a thought and as a picture it holds itself as it were suspended or pinned up over the stage throughout, a kind of

grotesque mandala in which Macbeth has cannibalised Duncan but is only half digesting him. And it is important we acknowledge this *as* a thought-picture, as an *image* of false accession, one that has been projected by the play above the play, for doing so helps separate Macbeth as a protagonist from this other force which hauls him along, this image that transfixes him and makes of him mere matter.

But further, the ‘thought’ and its image crystallise a wish – the wish to be king – whose trajectory merits perhaps more than the character of Macbeth the label of chief protagonist. In the first instance the wish transfers itself from the witches to Macbeth, or if you prefer the ‘guilty’ theory, from Macbeth via the witches back to himself. Following Macbeth, it insinuates itself into Banquo’s ambiguously clear conscience. It proceeds to envelop Lady Macbeth despite the formidable powers of resistance and forbearance she otherwise exhibits. Finally it runs itself into exhaustion through the dead bodies of its victims, its energy quenched like a fireball that has jumped from person to person and finally burned out. After all, if this were not the case, there would be no drama, perhaps no play. If the wish were not stronger than Macbeth, if his ‘identity’ were not its servant – for all the psychological depth that Shakespeare affords Macbeth’s response to it – then there would be no course: Macbeth would master it, and the play would be over before begun. In this respect the play is ‘about’ this uncontrollable wish and its ability to trade identities without respect to the grounding or precedence that was their supposed privilege. Indeed the wish to be king has a kind of infinite, sublime or universal force in the face of which identities are enfeebled, inept at forming themselves.

### Why Freud loves to hate graphology

So what’s new? Would we know it if we saw it? What does ‘new’ mean?

Freud, for one, has seen it all before. When he writes about graphology, for example – the ancient ‘art’ of telling fortunes from handwriting – it seems he’s got it all sewn up. There’s nothing new – no revelation, no epiphany. This is how Freud deals with prophecy and suggestion. The graphologist he portrays in ‘Dreams and Occultism’ had, in the words of Strachey’s translation, ‘once again only brought to light a powerful secret wish of the person who was questioning him’.<sup>2</sup>

‘Once again’: this phrase serves two purposes at once. Firstly, the graphologist has once again only brought to light a powerful secret wish, and in so doing has come upon something already in play, as

opposed to creating for the first time or inventing a hitherto nonexistent phenomenon. True, it was secret, but it was already there. What the graphologist believes he has identified in all its wondrous novelty is in fact old news.

And so, the graphologist's avowed skill – indeed the métier of graphology in general – must be seen as baseless, a parasite upon already given knowledge, a bootlegger. Graphology seizes upon a known quantity, and tries to pass off second-hand goods for new – its very ethos must be specious. But it's not merely that graphology is a sham or shambles, but also (secondly) that psychoanalysis is nothing of the sort, evidently. With the phrase 'once again' a kind of meta-discourse lights up the page. For Freud is insinuating that while graphology has been and must be dismissed with due despatch, *psychoanalysis* on the other hand – the science, the methodology, the profession – has been proved correct. The graphologist 'once again only brought to light a powerful secret wish of the person who was questioning him', says Freud, and in so saying he points, like a doctor of the law, through the tawdry veil of graphology to a bright psychoanalytic truth shining behind, namely that there are no mysteries of the sort graphology peddles, only secrets, secret wishes, dredged from the unconscious of the graphologist's client. We'll play down the fact that secret wishes may be just as mysterious as graphological revelations – pseudo-revelations, I mean – for Freud, in his demystifying braggadocio, wants us to think of secret wishes as rather ordinary (albeit psychoanalytic) facts. The graphologist had 'once again only brought to light a powerful secret wish of the person who was questioning him', so let's not get too excited about powerful secret wishes. The 'once again' moderates our curiosity. Secret wishes are somewhat banal and predictable, we are supposed to think, even though Freud feels some frisson for that very reason, from their admirable banality, from the fact that his discovery has (should have) passed into common scientific circulation: the idea of repression is by now so received that it could not surely cause a stir. And so it follows that – irresistibly or thereabouts – 'psychoanalysis' prime tenet has been – once more – ratified and upheld. The unconscious is at work. 'O graphologist,' we can hear Freud thinking, 'you thought you were exhibiting professional prowess, perhaps a rare gift? Sorry, no – all you did was facilitate the bringing to light of a repressed wish, and in so doing you merely added bolster – thank you, poor creature – to my theory of repression and to the science of psychoanalysis in general.' Graphology has done some of 'psychoanalysis' work, in short, the benighted graphologist unwittingly confirming psychoanalytic truth and method. Moreover, this kind of thing happens again and again in the professional life of psychoanalysis. Once again – it's almost

a cliché! – the psychoanalytic approach has received its vindication, its share of justice. There's nothing new in this, Freud wants to assure us. It's all almost wearily unsurprising, and it's all, please be advised, part of the grand psychoanalytic design.

But of course the fact that Freud needs to make an assurance in the first place suggests that all is not so self-evident as he might wish. Without his gentle doctrinal steer towards the correct interpretation we, the reader, might have missed this point about secrets, not picked up on the fact that this was yet another case (ah, yes) of the secret wish coming to light. Gentle but insistent, that is – a bit paternalistic. Do not forget that psychoanalysis, apparently so solid, is in reality but a new and competing science, even by the relatively late stage at which 'Dreams and Occultism' was penned (1932). In this respect psychoanalysis can boast scarcely more grounding, very lamentably, than graphology in all its spuriousness, than this johnny-come-lately that, rather inconveniently, has been around for a very long time indeed. Freud's stance might be analogous to that of the early Church Fathers emphasising the institutional force of Christianity at the expense of an archaic paganism from which it hadn't quite disassociated itself. How long, one wonders, must a science exist before it can indulge in a 'once again'? Is it premature? Has psychoanalysis indisputably won its spurs? After all, it's not as if Freud is saying something like, 'There goes another object dropping to the floor due to the pull of gravity. Once again gravity has demonstrated its irrefutable law, and once again my theory has been verified.' The theory of repression, of secret wishes, hardly enjoys that level of scientific or cultural credit – it lacks the gravity, the pull. Freud wants us, needs us, to sense and respect the established status of psychoanalysis, psychoanalysis *in* its established status, psychoanalysis *as* an establishment; he lures us to admire the patina of wisdom, of tried and trusted sapience accultured around it. And he needs to do so precisely because it is not absolutely self-evident. The facts do not speak for themselves, so Freud has to speak for them. It is therefore almost axiomatic that Freud must rebut graphology. He would have been obliged to rebut any such institutional threat. He will not – cannot, should not, must not – hear of graphology, or varieties of grapholism. To graphology, Freud's ears must remain closed. He will hear only what he wants to hear, which is what he already knows, namely that an unconscious secret is in play, and nothing more.

By virtue of such tensions around the status of psychoanalysis, this scenario of the graphologist in 'Dreams and Occultism' is already quite involved, but we must peel off a further layer to find a way to the core of these issues, a core consisting of concepts of ideology, in brief. In

effect, Freud has taken up or shadowed the very position he assigns to the graphologist's client. Instead of hearing or letting himself hear something new – the equivalent of a graphological revelation – Freud will hear only that which he has already internalised. He will allow neither himself nor the client to hear anything other than what was already, if only tacitly, known and preserved – the secret wish. In Freud's construction of the graphological encounter, the client, just like Freud himself, will be permitted to observe only a secret wish brought to light, and nothing more, neither extraneous material nor new evidence. The deadline for such passed long ago, almost unimaginably far back, almost out of time. All that is substantive has been posited or deposited long ago. Its form is the wish, something both the client and Freud already knew about, nursed already within them, long before – the whole epoch of psychoanalysis precedes it – any graphologist came on the scene. The truth was already within. It was within the client just as it was within Freud. And, just as the secret was within the client and within Freud, so the very secret of psychoanalysis itself lay hidden within graphology. It took Freud to point it out, we acolytes might have missed it, but, whichever way you cut it, there it was. The secret was wrapped inside the client, and the secret was wrapped within Freud, just as psychoanalysis – for a long, long time – was wrapped inside graphology. It was there all along. Which means that the time of psychoanalysis is much older than that of graphology. Graphology, though far older a 'science', intruded like a latecomer, an opportunist, a freeloader, upon the scene of the secret wish, wrapped itself around that wish, secreted it within its own graphologic body, and then brought it out later disguised as graphologic aperçu. Psychoanalysis meanwhile, which began as an institution circa 1900, enjoys a history or epoch of truth that extends back illimitably. The client's secret acts as a vector of this epoch.

The secret being wishful only adds to the complication. Freud's secret, his already known knowledge, his ironic perception, is wishful in nature too, and the example of the graphologist occasions its bringing to light. In his case, for his part, the secret wish is to uncover psychoanalysis within graphology and perhaps, indeed, within all that he might range across, at least those institutions that along with graphology he must rebut, such as religion – rebut them but extract the psychoanalytic truth at their heart, keep the kernel but toss out the shell. If psychoanalysis lodges secretly within graphology, its residence there – or rather its discoverability – triggers an access of libidinal pleasure in Freud himself. Freud takes *pleasure* in his phrase, 'once again only brought to light a powerful secret wish of the person who was questioning him'. It raises the question of whether a science – even if it is 'modern' – ought to

permit itself pleasure in the course of its scientific business: shouldn't that impair some constitutional principle of what it takes to be a science? Doesn't mixing business with pleasure adulterate the business in principle? . . . Freud takes his pleasure twice over, maybe more. Firstly, that 'once again' gives a yield, and secondly, the fact that the secret has been brought to light – that is, psychoanalysis is right again – gives a yield. 'I'm getting pleasure again from being right again,' murmurs the egoic voice from within Freud's scientific text. And the pleasure in question depends for its libidinal charge upon a secret, that is upon what is already known, and therefore upon a 'resistance' – to use an unstable word – to anything new or supervenient.

The missing term in all this is *suggestion*. The graphologist has, in the psychoanalytic sense, 'suggested' something to his client. That's how the bringing to light of the secret wish had operated. The graphologist's words coincided with that inward wish on the client's part, and 'suggestion' is the name psychoanalysis gives to such coincidence. It's a blatant misnomer, however, because the client will not, no more than Freud, tolerate 'suggestion' of any kind. On the contrary: the graphologist's client – and equally his homologue, the analyst's patient – remain, at least in Freud's book, impervious to anything other than what's already within them. It is as if the ego has set their faculties of cognition to receive pleasurable data only, leaving a broad margin for everything else. You can't suggest anything else to them and so, in effect, you can't *suggest* at all; there's nothing you can come up with. They are blessed or afflicted – depending how you look at it – with a kind of structural deafness that filters out unpleasurable 'suggestions' wherever it can. If 'suggestion' as a word denotes something new, a ventured proposition, an as yet unconsidered avenue, Freud, or Freudianism, turns it upside down. So what does the graphologist tell you? Nothing new. Not what will be but what will have been. What gets deciphered in the handwriting is not the future but the past, this being the wish's true and only provenance. What will have been wished surges, by means of suggestion, into the client's field of cognition whereupon he hears the graphologist describing something long desired but long repressed.

We may justly deduce, therefore, that the cognition is never not a re-cognition. In hearing the suggestion, the client experiences the return of something intimately, even erotically, close to him. It is his truth, and it is true for him, for him as himself and no other. His very identity appears to be engaged in this recognition of something within, closely his, that has been returned to him via the somewhat unpredictable agency of suggestion. The pathos of this identity effect or affect must be nearly overwhelming – if that indeed is what it is. For here a deep and

critical fault line crackles its way through psychoanalysis. On one side of it, the theory of the ego as a subject. On the other, the less explored side, the side I wish to go down here, that of the ego as non-subject, a subject unconfined by subjectivity, and by extension the ego as the subject of death.

In summary terms, the ego as subject works under suggestion as follows. A structurally deaf subject, his or her back turned to all that is new, to all articles of modernity not exhibiting symmetry with the ancient inner wish, suddenly – by way of a suggestion that is anything but – has its egoic chambers flooded with the miraculous return of that wish. ‘Return’ is the word, for the return of the wish carries as its collateral the identity of the wishing person, so much so that in the absence of such moments of return and recognition that person – that ‘subject’, as we are supposed to say – might never experience the sense of subjective identity at all. For whence, in a psychoanalytic environment that appears to disallow or forestall the creation of identity through ongoing empirical time, would such a sense arrive? The identity-benefit involved in suggestion appears intense. The client re-experiences a secret wish like finding lost property. Not only does the secret belong to him or her, but the him or her in question finds itself established or re-established in precisely such moments . . .

But in this I smell a rat, and I want to put up a contrary hypothesis, namely that identity is neither possible nor desirable for the so-called subject. Once that is proven, we fall directly into the domain of ideology, and of the inextricable link between ideology and death. The implications for the story of Freud and the graphologist, for example, would be profound. Instead of seeing Freud pull the strings to make the graphologist say what Freud wants him to say, we would steal upon a scene in which the wish itself is in control and no longer the property or instrument of Sigmund Freud. The ‘wish’ in this case is another name for death – and ‘death’ signifies something rather different from Freud’s own metapsychological definition.

### **I wish therefore I wish**

Perhaps there’s nothing new in this ‘going beyond the subject’ either. After all, various, especially Francophone, thinkers have for decades now been questioning the subjectivity and identity of the psychoanalytic subject – and in a second I shall zoom in on one of them. To be more accurate, various thinkers have taken the prompts they find in Freud regarding the dissolution of the classical subject and developed them in

their own idiom. More or less adroitly they have eked out the implications of an ego structurally riven between conscious and unconscious forces. But in this philosophical discourse of subjectivity, and of the end of subjectivity – call it the latest phase of the Copernican revolution – one critical and singularly psychoanalytic (as opposed to philosophical) theme has suffered neglect. I refer to the Freudian wish. If the disease of subjectivity, so to speak, has been so fastidiously catalogued, this has owed not to any discovery of the deleterious effects of wishing but to a rather more straightforward manipulation, actually, of canonical philosophic concepts of the self seen to be at work in Freud's writing. Baldly speaking, the thinking of the Freudian subject, or the post-Freudian post-subject, has continued within the dimension or lineage of questions of subjectivity, within the era of the subject, as it were, rather than turning towards or letting itself be pulled away towards the concept – if it is a concept – of the wish. With few exceptions, the subject continues to be thought in subjectivist terms.

Now, one might protest that the wish has been nothing if not worked and reworked in recent decades, under the name of *desire*. And how, one might add, has 'desire' entered the vocabulary of broadly 'continental' philosophy (whatever its geographic home) if not through psychoanalytic channels? Of course, it would be another, and inestimably more extensive, project to chart the fortunes of the word and concept 'desire' – from Hegel to Lacan, say, or from Marcuse to Foucault – but I venture to guess that any such project would conclude that desire as *wish* has been systematically sidelined. Desire as intention, yes. Desire as an instrument of subjective will, yes again. Desire as the (more or less futile) pursuit of ontological security, yes yes yes. But desire as wish? I think not. I attempt to explain it below, but in broad terms this has come about because the wish, made to stand before the architecture of subjective identity, simply sees no place in it. Indeed the wish needs no locus, being an altogether different class of entity than desire. It's not so much that the wish, to use poststructuralist language, 'exceeds' subjective identity and thus subjectivist thinking, but rather that it has very little to do with it, at least in its conventional forms. To that extent, writing the history of the philosophy of the wish would be not merely challenging but unfeasible in principle – the wish was never an object of philosophy to begin with.

My 'example' here or test-case is Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen. I put 'example' in quotation marks because Borch-Jacobsen both continues that subjectivist tradition and reflects back on it, so that his work does not sit comfortably there. By and large, Borch-Jacobsen probably goes further than anyone in unpacking the concept of the subject in

Freudianism, even to the point of neutralising its every philosophic pretension, but there he stops: he does not (and nor does he aspire to) then make the leap to a 'properly' psychoanalytic, that is post- or para-philosophic, position. I begin with an excerpt from his fine book *The Emotional Tie: Psychoanalysis, Mimesis and Affect*. In it we find the author commenting, in turn, on his own earlier publication, the economically titled *The Freudian Subject*. Borch-Jacobsen has been appraising the return, in France, to what he calls 'Freud's philosophical underpinnings'. He writes:

That, it would be useless to deny, is what I attempted to do in *The Freudian Subject*. I thought that it might be timely, even urgent, to question whether, behind the apparently radical critique of consciousness and ego, the schema of the subject might not be silently continuing to govern the theory and the practice – which is also to say the politics – of psychoanalysis. In short, I wanted to know the extent to which the 'fundamental concepts' of psychoanalysis might still be the prisoners of, or might have escaped, the summons of their foundation – for that, in fact, is always what is involved in questions of 'the subject'.<sup>3</sup>

The paragraph presents psychoanalysis as starting from a philosophical agenda, an 'apparently radical critique of consciousness and ego', but then deviating from it, or being made to deviate from it by the silent governance of subjectivism controlling it from within. This is why the radicality of its critique was apparent, not real – 'the *apparently* radical critique'. In reality the 'critique' had little bite, for 'subjectivism' had bridled it. So it is a question of freedom and constraint, borne out by the penal metaphors 'summons', 'escaped', 'prisoners', 'govern': subjectivism was the prison from which psychoanalysis' 'critique' failed perhaps to escape.

Borch-Jacobsen's *Tie* contains some knots, however – four of them:

1. Giving the name 'critique' to the work of psychoanalysis signals a prejudice. It positions psychoanalysis not just within philosophy in general, but within a certain tradition and style of continental and/or transcendental philosophy, and even within a Kantian or post-Kantian species thereof. The word 'critique' points down a quite different path from say, the neuro-psychological path along which one might equally have seen psychoanalysis leave its tracks.
2. The allusion to Lacan in the quoted phrase 'fundamental concepts' speaks to a similar prejudice, this one made up of two elements:
  - (a) The imputation to psychoanalysis of a substrate of fundamental concepts on which it has been erected and from which it takes its

support confers at a stroke a philosophic stature or profile easy to dispute. Can the stock-in-trade of psychoanalysis, at least in its Freudian manifestations, be said unequivocally to consist in *fundamental concepts*? Does the Unconscious, for example, add up to a ‘concept’? Not the least reason for doubting so must be the ‘fundamental’ point that the Unconscious, if there is such a thing, begins in the very opposition to and difference from, those means of conceptualisation considered as conscious and rational. How would the theory of hysteria, for example, ever have been developed if this were not the case? One of the great problems – and equally one of the great opportunities for thought – presented by the Unconscious has to be its uncertain conceptual status, the fact that it refuses to be led rationally or scientifically back from empirical evidence to theoretical truth. One cannot ‘prove’ the existence of the Unconscious, one can only infer it (as Freud conceded), and the gap between the two, proof and inference, marks out the absence of its concept. It doesn’t have the benefit of secure conceptual moorings, and if it did it would not be unconscious. It’s not just that the Unconscious persists in being *difficult* to conceptualise but rather that the thought-system in which it operates fails to accord with conceptualism, which to it appears quite alien, as if from a different galaxy.

(b) Lacan’s work itself – and again it is to him that the phrase ‘fundamental concepts’ owes – underpins Borch-Jacobsen’s prejudice. Lacan’s title *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, tells quite a tale. Again it is a matter of finding or inventing a foundation, and a conceptual foundation to boot, precisely where (Freudian psychoanalysis) none may exist. The title describes a classical architecture, a proportionate basis, of thought, precisely in an area where all classical norms of thought are lacking, where even the principle of non-contradiction (to take another ‘fundamental’ tenet) abjures its privilege. True, Freudian psychoanalysis has a relatively consistent logic of its own – one might even stretch to calling it a system – but when that logic or that system employs such terms as ‘transference’ or ‘life instinct’, it has patently taken leave of conceptualist foundations. A notion such as transference must be at best counter-intuitive, at worst a boundaryless detour from the territory of the concept: how to safely conceive the relation between two points (patient and analyst) in which neither is fixed and both persist chiefly at the suggestion of the other?

3. The critique of *consciousness*. Who would not be ready to agree that Freudian psychoanalysis constitutes a critique of consciousness? Yet that word ‘consciousness’ represents a *faux-amis*, for Borch-Jacobsen has painted it in philosophic rather than psychoanalytic colours. ‘Consciousness’ here has associations of Descartes and Kant, that is with the faculty of reason. Freud may inadvertently have ‘critiqued’ the said faculty, but consciousness in this sense was hardly his principal target. For Freud ‘consciousness’ related firstly to the neural perception system, and secondly to the Unconscious understood as the reservoir of repressed material. Any critique of consciousness in the post-Cartesian sense will have been a by-product of these.
4. The critique of *ego*. The critique of *ego*? As with the term ‘consciousness’, Borch-Jacobsen’s usage leans towards a general Cartesianism, to the ego of the *cogito*. And besides, did Freud’s development of the ego, that is the Freudian *Ich*, come about as a critical weapon in a critique of such Cartesianism – or did it, rather, come about as a way of naming the agent of the wish?

So much for Borch-Jacobsen’s representation of psychoanalysis. In effect, he turns psychoanalysis into philosophy only to then mock it for being philosophical (a curious mechanism of oscillating appropriation and disavowal rattles through his text, one not a million miles from that described famously by Freud as the *fort-da*). But the more intractable problem turns on the term ‘subject’ itself. Try looking it up not only in the index to the Standard Edition of Freud’s works, but even in Laplanche and Pontalis’s *Language of Psychoanalysis*, and you will find no match.<sup>4</sup> This strikes me as extremely significant, and should make us stop shy of transposing psychoanalysis so eagerly into the key of the subject; it should also inhibit the crude subjectivist assimilation of psychoanalysis (be it for or against the subject) perpetrated under the name of ‘Theory’. If Freud elects, however unintentionally, not to avail himself of that lexicon, it may be for reasons more serious than a failure of articulation on his part. It may be to do with the nature of the ego – that is, the wishful ego – *per se*. For contrary to the preferences of the formidable Lacanian tradition and other philosophically inclined thinkers of psychoanalysis, nothing about the Freudian ego suggests for a moment that subjectivity in its mode of self-identical or self-reflexive subject would ever furnish its goal (nor indeed that of the analyst treating it). The ego has other fish to fry, and subjectivity comes well down its wish-list. Perhaps the post-Lacanian tradition itself suffers from a kind of blind wishfulness, positing a desire for subjectivity where none exists. So it may be less a case of Freud ‘failing’ to posit a subject, or missing

a trick of philosophic expression, and more the very work of the ego, the drive of the ego – in collaboration with the death-drive – to resist or negate subjectivity in general.

What, after all, does the ego stand to gain from subjectivity? In his next paragraph from *The Emotional Tie* Borch-Jacobsen goes on to identify the (for him) dominant trope of psychoanalysis, the one that confirms psychoanalysis always comes down to philosophy. This is *representation* and, more specifically, *self*-representation, which, in Borch-Jacobsen's view, everywhere crosses the Freudian 'subject' and so catches psychoanalysis time and again in the net of the *cogito* it might have thought to slip. Along with doubt, reason and faith, self-representation forms a clutch of Cartesian benefits that subjectivity has to offer, though as the pre-eminent means of subject-formation it stands first among these equals. A subject unable to represent itself to itself, however falsely, fails to matriculate as a subject. It has not experienced – in Hegelese – that 'negative moment' that confers reality and depth upon its own position, leaving it to languish in uncompleted non-determinacy. Only self-representation, even or especially where mediated through another, can close that gap . . . All of which is fine, but – and here is the flaw in Borch-Jacobsen's argument – it says nothing about why the ego would want it. The *subject* may require self-representation perforce as its condition, but to the Freudian ego the same does not apply. What interests that ego is not itself as such but its pleasure. And, not needing to posit itself subjectively, the ego need not be bothered with self-representation either – unless in some secondary way it can glean pleasure from it. In other words, the stitching-together of self-representation and pleasure – led by Lacan in his work on the 'mirror-stage' – calls for unpicking. The ego will occasionally derive pleasure from self-representation perhaps, but it has no need for its subjectivist foundations. Indeed it becomes questionable whether the ego has any 'self' at all, any reflexivity worth the name in its constitution. But we shall look into that when we return to the theme of suggestion.

Saying the ego can dispense with self-representation, on the other hand, does not mean it wants or needs nothing from subjectivity whatsoever. For all self-representation's pre-eminence in the realm of subjectivity, it defers to a still more primary feature of subjectivity less easy to forego. This is, if you'll pardon me, *subjectivity itself* – the fact of the collected thereness of an entity, a ground, a locus, a *sub-iectum* or even 'thrown-downness' (to give it a Heideggerian accent) – and there are reasons why the ego both must and must not have truck with it. So let's start with why it must, why, despite the low value to it of self-representation, the ego must nevertheless maintain some contract with the subjectivity that

is self-representation's vehicle – and let us drop the word 'ego' in favour of the *Ich* used in the original Freud, for once we say 'ego' we acquiesce in a Latinity not just of word but of concept, implying a juridical notion of self as that-which-is-to-be-represented, that-which-ought-to-render-account-of-itself both legally and philosophically. '*Ich*' bears no sign of having agreed, even *sub rosa*, to such associations.

We had begun to prise this *Ich* apart from the Cartesian *cogito*. Do we infer that *Ich* is not rational? Well, in a *rationalist* sense it may not be 'rational' – capable, for example, of mental process that both synthetically organises conscious perceptions under primary categories and analytically derives one bit of information from another – yet *Ich* is nothing if not living calculation. One could even dub it the origin of calculation, for it does nothing but expend its pre-rational energy in continually appraising the risks to, and opportunities for, its so sought-after pleasure – where this 'pre-rational' calculation actually abuts on and structures all calculation of an economic kind in the 'real world'. *Ich* watches quasi-neurally for where it will gain pleasure and, where it can't, identifies the shortest detour back to it. It is economic through and through, a master calculator of gratification. From this perspective *Ich* appears smarter than the subject, and smarter *because* it's more stupid, more instinctive, more economic, not detained by perfecting self-representations. It hasn't had to formulate anything about itself, just run its endless psychomathematics. All of which bears out the uselessness of subjectivity to *Ich*; subjectivity would at best slow it down. Yet there's a snag. *Ich* not only performs these calculations, it also profits directly from them – it goes on to experience the pleasure it has identified. And in order to have that experience it would also, one assumes, have to occupy some site of reception, for how could pleasure be pleasure and remain unreceived? And how could it occupy such a site without capitulating to the first rule of subjectivity, namely laying itself down? How can it experience its own pleasure without being that pleasure's subject? Maybe *Ich* can live without representation, but subjectivity *per se* it cannot so blithely ignore. *Ich* must let itself perhaps become subject enough to field the pleasure it has shaken out, even though the accoutrements of subjectivity, notably self-representation, provide it with nothing it needs. An infinite *Ich*, an entirely ungrounded, subjectless *Ich* would not be sufficiently determined, or at least sufficiently located, to take its own pleasure, could not guide its exiled wishes back toward itself.

This is why *Ich* must forge links with the subjective, even though it may now waive self-representation. But self-representation was not the only fly in the ointment. A graver matter should ward *Ich* away from subjectivity. It puts *Ich* in an impossible relation to subjectivity which

now becomes both dearest friend and worst enemy. For the moment this ever-calculating *Ich* accepts subjectivity – on the terms that without it it would lack a platform for the receipt of pleasure – it finds itself jerked into a horizon of finitude – a horizon *tout court* – demonstrably at variance with its infinite wishful nature. This rarefied-barbaric *Ich*, wrought from unalloyed libidinal wish, knows only expansion, life, absorption, merging and what Freud will even propose as a ‘multicellular’ imperative – the drive to annexation, the incorporation of others into its ‘self’, etc., and hence an importunate disregard for the preservation of its own borders as a discrete thing. Nevertheless, this infinite, million-eyed but blind urge has to contend with some inner structuration in order to coincide with its own pleasure – the amoeba must build a skeleton to house its *jouissance*. To experience the fulfilment of its own wishes, *Ich* must limit or curb itself and thereby interrupt its own pleasure – pleasure’s arrival, so to speak, cuts a caesura in it. This momentary but irreducible break punctuates *Ich* like a minor death, an incision into an entity spawned upon continuous self-preservation through expansion. The rabid pursuit of pleasure therefore polarises *Ich*’s direction as a thing; now *Ich* founders at 180 degrees from itself, caught irreconcilably between finitude and infinity. So when one invokes ‘subjectivity’ in relation to psychoanalysis, one should do so only by proceeding briskly beyond those relatively superficial aspects such as self-representation towards these more essential questions. What Derrida might call a ‘necessary but impossible’ relationship between subjectivity and *Ich* is at stake.

Nor is it some merely notional limit to *Ich* that we are describing. Being brought into the dimension of subjectivity entails for *Ich* a first sense of time and specifically of its own time, of a temporality in its nature now to be logged and factored in with its otherwise open-ended and open-mouthed odyssey. The Being-towards-Pleasure of *Ich* may differ hugely from philosophical *Dasein*, but having buckled on its rude subjectivity and entered the pleasure-economy – and having found there its niche – *Ich* learns its first and most lasting lesson, namely that *it must wait*. If pleasure requires pursuing it means it is not here yet, and waiting for it shapes all of *Ich*’s experience. *Ich* now feels itself to be ‘in time’ insofar as it has had patience and suffering thrust upon it. There is, then, a pathos of this *Ich*, a pathos existing at the highest structural level, an affect before affectivity, and as such its almost transcendental quality would make one hesitate before citing it as self-relation (certainly it would not be self-representation) on *Ich*’s part; but on the other hand a certain ‘negativity’, formally similar to that in Hegelian dialectics, has now pressed itself into *Ich*’s innocent mould. The imprint it leaves must

look like death, for hitherto nothing had checked its erotic polyphiloprogenitivity. It has gained a drowning-mark upon it, to paraphrase *The Tempest*, a watermark of temporality, of waiting and of cessation. One would hesitate too before reframing such pathos of the *Ich* as a form of lack or absence (the likely post-Lacanian reading). If *Ich* waits for something (pleasure) that by definition eludes it, this does not necessarily imply that an absence blanks out its centre. Its experience of time, though one of deferral and gratification, does not straightforwardly equate to a simple loss-and-gain or absence-and-presence, for *Ich* has always been redolent with wishing. Rather than a subject equipped with a wish either fulfilled or put off, *Ich* is nothing but wish itself, wish incarnate. Immanent within *Ich*, the wish needs to be understood as verb rather than noun, so to speak, an ongoing, dynamic, erotic wishing always inundated with that unquenchable instinct. Such is the libido, and such the difference between philosophic and psychoanalytic subject.

And yet, another twist. Our brand of psychoanalytic subjectivity requires one extra distillation. We have purified it of self-representation, and we have purified it of some metaphysical sediment of absence and presence, but still it needs to be cleansed of an equally metaphysical notion of *place*. The thrown-down sub-iect will, insofar as it will thereby have been posited, have been posited *somewhere*. Subjectivity goes hand in hand with some kind of placement, some location, and *Ich*'s albeit two-faced concordat with it might suggest that it has been placed somewhere too. How can it take on its subjective substrate without not just being placed but placed somewhere where its pleasure can accrue? And indeed, were it not for the possibility (for Freud the necessity) of transference, one might rest on a fairly secure notion of the place of pleasure. Were transference not the cardinal notion – we have learned to jib at calling it a fundamental concept – that it is, *Ich* might well succumb further to subjectivity's totemic power. Standing firmly on its moving subjective dais, as upon some Greek chariot, it would simply search out, among all the superegoic, social traffic conspiring to delay it, the quickest route by which to fulfil its wishes, and then ingest them, upon its own ground. It would become a docile consumer, identifiable to any wish-marketeer. Nothing even as modestly subtle as vicarious pleasure would complicate the scene. With the general possibility of transference, however, and the specific case of suggestion to which we now return, *Ich* finds itself curiously moved from where and what it thought it was in order to feel pleasure in a form it didn't reckon it would enjoy.

About suggestion we were saying that any cognition of it on the patient or client's part marks a re-cognition, to the extent that 'suggestion' is

really the opposite of what's going on. As in the case of the graphologist, suggestion works by bringing to light a wish (powerful, secret) that has been locked out under repression – which is all well and good except that nothing new has been adduced, despite the word's connotations. It only refits *Ich* to itself, and doubtless some of the pleasure *Ich* experiences must be that of appreciating the economy, the conservative genius even, of this gesture. Though *Ich* appears to receive the suggestion from another, from outside itself, that suggestion has pleasurable qualities only to the extent that it originated with *Ich* – it merely plays back that which *Ich* had at some formative stage figured as pleasurable but had learned to repress, and thus works like an echo. Once again, nothing new can ever be proffered to *Ich*, which immures itself against all news, attuned solely to the belated and stochastic fragments of pleasure-sound, the delayed psychic music that sporadically reverberates upon it.

But we were also hinting that suggestion, grouped as it is under the general 'logic' of transference, cannot be so conceptually neat, for, being psychoanalytic, its conceptualist foundations are prone to subsidence. Indeed suggestion has more power than even Freud imagined, effecting a displacement upon *Ich* so forceful that the very notion of *Ich* itself will be utterly changed. At first sight, granted, one might take suggestion as a means of 'negative' self-positing on *Ich*'s part. One might think, in a Hegelian-Lacanian way, that the suggestion, as a ticket back to its innermost pleasure, offers a kind of dark mirror in which *Ich* perceives and 'knows' itself. But such an interpretation sits on two questionable pillars, and this is where the question of place becomes critical.

According to Freud suggestion works, as we know, by 'bringing to light a powerful secret wish'. It appears to have maieutic, even shamanistic, features. What was hidden gets drawn out, except no magic is supposed to be involved. Because, however, that wish has been secret, even and especially to its bearer, its bringing to light feels less like the exposure of a withheld truth than the miraculous apparition of something now returned. If the secret wish is indeed secret even to its bearer, the original secretion of it would be tantamount to its being lost, and not least because it will have been sent to the Unconscious where, obviously enough, *Ich* cannot be conscious of it. To all intents and purposes the wish is lost. Moreover, that wish could not be said to have been repressed if in principle it might not have remained lost forever. Once posted into the Unconscious by the act of repression, the wish in principle has been lost for good. This means it remains structurally lost even if and when returned, for its passing beyond the reaches of conscious (re)cognition has conditioned it. The implication in turn is that the wish could never again be fully and properly identified as such, and when suggestion

allegedly ‘brings to light a powerful secret wish’ it actually brings to light something intrinsically unrecognisable. The suggestion responsible for returning the wish returns a mysterious object or affect that differs in principle from the original – and not by virtue of a classic Freudian ‘displacement and condensation’ such as occurs in the dreamwork, which after all preserves the core identity of the wish, but of a determining loss from the time of its repression that infects it with such deceiving unrecognisability. In effect the secret wish remains secret even when charmed into the open by suggestion. What *Ich* falls for in recognising its long-lost wish must be essentially false. It cannot but misrecognise the wish that returns without ever being certifiably itself again.

Hence a predicament: how can *Ich* cash in the pleasure that now threatens to vanish amid its own disguises and alterations? Will it be content to welcome back this changeling despite the chronic uncertainty, as in *The Return of Martin Guerre*, over its authenticity? I think this predicament leaves us with two options. Either (1) *Ich* does somehow compromise and find a way of gleaning pleasure by this uncanny revenant from its own Unconscious that it will never properly recognise, or (2) *Ich* changes to accommodate the potential pleasure, that is it adapts and ‘becomes’ the right *Ich* for that pleasure. Psychoanalytically speaking, only option (2) can be viable. Remember that *Ich* has nothing invested in its own identity; as a protean wish-merchant it (and of course it cannot therefore be an ‘it’) seeks only pleasure, drawing on subjectivity to the minimum and certainly not to the extent of buying identity from it. Thus it has no qualms about giving itself up wherever pleasure is on offer.

This is the deep sense in which suggestion works, and it is where Freud has understated the odds. For if *Ich* is so – and so justifiably – blasé about its identity, suggestion may not just influence but fundamentally alter and refashion it at will. As a mode of the transference, it not only ‘suggests’ pleasures that *Ich* adopts forthwith, it actually recreates *Ich* in their image. *Ich*’s indifference towards its own identity causes it to be infinitely malleable, such that *Ich* amounts to no more than a mist of reactive energy ready to coalesce around random suggestions of pleasure. Responsive in an a priori fashion, *Ich* is less a thing that responds, more a potential responsiveness per se, a latent ground upon which pleasure figures itself. Suggestion must be understood in a very strong sense indeed, not as the felicitous art of wish-inducement so much as a form of manipulation with the power to impress new material upon *Ich*’s pliable mind. You could call it brainwashing, except that *Ich* enjoys no existence before or outside of such suggestive encounters, being rather constituted by each one afresh. Strictly speaking, *Ich* has no body or substance to corrupt or pervert, so that suggestion in this strong

sense should not automatically be construed as malevolent; one might even say that suggestion gives birth to the innocent, virgin *Ich* that it simultaneously determines.

If this is true, it flies in the face of Freudian accounts of suggestion (and at the least exacerbates an ambiguity in psychoanalytic theory and practice regarding suggestion's openness to abuse). Whereas Freud effectively bars anything new from the scene of suggestion, anything other than what was already known and held within *Ich*, we are arguing the contrary, that everything suggested appears new and even surprising, for the wish will first have been lost beyond recognition before suggestion purports to re-deliver it. Even if this were the old wish resurfaced, *Ich* would not be able to recognise it as such, forced always to occupy a 'position' – a placeless place – of reaction and response in relation to it. So that, in addition to this dislocation of the wish, the evanescent *Ich* that condenses around it will only ever achieve brief, strategic identity as the wish's reagent-at-hand.

As for the notion of pleasure, it too calls for adjustment. If *Ich* does indeed get pleasure from suggestion, but the wish suggested in that process is structurally other than the original it supposedly reactivates, such pleasure must also be divided from itself, or perhaps refracted like a pencil seen in a glass of water. Just as suggestion revives a wish that has been structurally lost and is therefore no longer 'there' to be revived, so the original pleasure, now in theory reactivated, has actually been effaced. So how could *Ich* get its pleasure? How would it know how to recognise it? Only, presumably, through some legerdemain that enables *Ich* to fancy the suggested wish as a peculiar form of the original. *Ich* would hear the new, suggested wish and immediately ascribe some provenance to it, mythologise it in order to make it erotically acceptable, deceive itself or the wish that the impostor be the real thing. Only then would the books balance. Except that *Ich*, as we were saying, has but strategic identity of its own, fabricated on the spot by the wish-field – in a moment we shall describe this as the ideology-field – that possesses it.

Beneath these conflicting views (on the one hand, *Ich* nebulously floating until seized upon and configured by the wish; on the other, *Ich* retaining sufficient identity to be able to fantasy pleasure back into that same wish) lie views equally conflicting about pleasure's characteristics. In Freud, pleasure only ever comes *back*, only ever becomes itself in relation to a memory or history; and suggestion, apart from anything else, is a theory of memory. Freud cannot conceive pleasure except as a relation to the past, and his famous formula for it, 'the absence of unpleasure', refers to a former peace. But according to the other view, the one we are propounding, pleasure arrives as if from nowhere, almost like chance,

even if *Ich* then airbrushes it to make it look like it came from its own psychic past. The difference in these views derives in turn from different interpretations of repression. As we were saying, repression wields more power than Freud apportions it: in being able to secrete wishes into the ‘Unconscious’, repression does more than simply save them into a bank from which, under the subsequent mandate of suggestion, they may be withdrawn. The act of repression separates the wish from the conscious realm as it transfers it to the Unconscious, and in this transfer the wish forsakes its recognisability. In this respect, the Unconscious describes a quite different ‘psyche’ from that of the Consciousness it traditionally couples, and, what’s more, if it didn’t it wouldn’t be unconscious. If the Unconscious *is* unconscious, it cannot pair up with a Consciousness, for insofar as repression divides the one from the other at a fundamental level they do not belong to the same order, the order of the one, the univocal psyche. Ironically, then, repression constitutes not a link with, but a break from, the past, or at most a deep reconfiguration of it. Since nothing wishful and repressed from the past can be recognised with any confidence, we conclude that nor can any cognitive or epistemological surety guarantee continuity from then to now.

In what, therefore, does pleasure consist? All right, it may have unplugged from the past, it may burst at unprecedented intervals like lightning upon this quivering, erotic *Ich*, but what is its affective tie to *Ich*? (Borch-Jacobsen’s *The Emotional Tie* translates *Le lien affectif*.) All we have to go on is precisely that randomness, for any pleasure bodied forth by suggestion could not be recognised as such, and it may be, moreover, that very randomness that holds the key to pleasure. It may be just that break with the past, the deviation from continuity, the wandering from aetiological progression which define pleasure as such. In proposing this we take another pace, of course, away from Freud whose ‘absence of unpleasure’ would abhor so disruptive a code; and we also highlight the fact that by reclaiming *Ich*, as we tried to, from subjectivity and its promise of identity, ostensibly a gesture of Freudian fundamentalism on our part, we were already severing *Ich*’s ties to its own past as a specific, whole and unique entity, and thereby depriving it of its essential Freudian continuity and integrity, its *conatus*, over time. Our fundamentalism regarding the wish has thus far been so unremitting, in other words, that for the sake of this one sacrament it has flouted Freudian theology more broadly.

Another way of posing the issue would be to ask whether *Ich* requires a memory, in effect a memory of itself, in order to hunt and gather pleasure, but again the answer hangs on one’s understanding of repression. Freud, manifestly, would never entertain the risk of repressed material

being absolutely lost, while we are countering that repression deserves its name under that condition only. Not just that, but this in-principle loss, this gap at the heart of memory, even of history, makes possible all subsequent movement, variation, progression and contingency. Contra Freud (but perhaps pro Nietzsche) not all of the future reflects the past. Psychologically speaking, a *de jure* stratum of forgetting runs through the psyche, somewhere between conscious and unconscious functions. The taking of pleasure will have been preceded by this blackout, by a forgetting or kind of super-repression, and probably more than preceded by it – coloured by it, afforded its affective sense. That is, the structural loss preceding and determining the fulfilment of a wish accounts for at least a portion of the pleasurableness of the pleasure taken. Pleasure may or may not have to do with the presentation, the coming-into-presence, of some gratification, but it almost certainly involves an ‘experience’, if that is the *mot juste*, of a loss, of a non-recognition, of an otherness or forgetfulness both within and outside its reach. *Ich* has to a degree to not know or misrecognise pleasure in order to experience it as such.

Before closing this excursus, let us return briefly to *Macbeth* to see how our understanding might have developed in the light of the preceding remarks. We pitched into the debate over whether the witches’ prophecy marks the return of Macbeth’s own repressed wish or, on the other hand, articulates some kind of external knowledge of which Macbeth, up to that point, has been innocent. We are now equipped to see the dilemma as false. Even if Macbeth, this fictional character, had, let us say, nursed within him for a considerable time prior to the witches’ apocalypse the wish for, the ‘thought’ of, his own accession to the Scottish throne, and if he had, on account of its treacherous and transgressive character, been obliged to repress that wish, he would still be in a position to be surprised by it as it came again to light, for the mechanism of repression, in a constitutive moment, will have taken the wish away from him absolutely before returning it through the conduit of the witches. Structurally speaking, Macbeth will have had to forget the wish, so that even if the very same, original wish returns to him, it must come as a surprise. He will be surprised by the private truth he has hatched so long, surprised, in effect, by himself – and open to suggestion as if he had stopped being himself for a while. The pleasure he experiences – that rush of exhilaration at hearing the prophecy, an adrenal hit that he must mask from his accompanying officer, Banquo – concerns therefore this gap in his own continuity rather than the apparently pleasurable content of the wish – being installed as king.

The notion of owning one’s repressed material seems naive in the face of repression’s true power. After all, how could the witches have got

hold of Macbeth's wish if this were not the case? How, if there were not some cutting of the thread between Macbeth and his private ambition, some repression in the radical sense, could the wish ever be hijacked by, in this case, the witches? For it does not take witches to perform this supposedly supernatural feat; rather, it belongs to the nature of repression not just to open repressed secrets to others, but equally to invent another person's secrets for them so that they could appear authentic. In this respect the witches merely personify the law of repression as the expropriation, circulation and manipulation of the repressed. That secrecy of the wish within himself demarcates almost geometrically the space or possibility of the other's appropriation and utilisation of it, as a kind of non-foreknowledge, or fore-non-knowledge, on his part. The space of prophecy coincides with this gap within himself.

Finally, therefore, the condition of the inner 'truth', the 'substance' of prophecy, equally works as pure fiction. I will work up this thought below, but in a radical sense Macbeth does not and cannot know or decide what the status of the prophecy-suggestion is. Because of that inner 'gap', that suspension of memory, he has become incapable of adjudicating over the prophecy-suggestion's authenticity, meaning that it is true and fictional in equal parts. Which means in turn that Macbeth finds himself caught between recognition and credulity, knowledge and belief – hence the irresolvable question over whether or not he already had the picture of his own elevation. In *Macbeth* that (in)credulity or unlikelihood of the suggestion wears the clothes of 'weird sisters', appearing in a deliberately semi-believable form as if to make the point. And more subliminally the play as a whole deals with credulity, suppressing vision in particular in favouring of hearing, hearing through the darkness within. What's more, the secret wish, the royal ambition, *remains* secret to Macbeth even in the moment and aftermath of its exposure, for his own 'original' link to it has been lost, whether it existed or not. A dark spot on the revealed wish itself is the possibility of repression.

### Ideology sans ideologues

I heralded earlier the onset of ideology into these issues. Clearly, the 'Freudian subject' we have been attending to dwells in an extreme passivity that makes it easy game for all forms of manipulation, especially political. Ironically, this is to reclaim the term 'subject', for while on the one hand it continues to lack any positive self-reflexivity – indeed has had its relation to self largely excised – on the other hand *Ich* has

now clothed itself in little but its being-subject-to suggestion, subject, therefore, to everything except itself. Left like this, such a concept of subjectivity looks merely paranoid, however, making the Ich-subject the plaything of random voices, or ideological cannon fodder. So let's develop it further, and by way of an adjustment to Freud's notion of the death-drive.

We saw Freud shadow-boxing with the hapless graphologist, banning anything new from the scene of suggestion. The wish had to correspond to an ancient desire, recall a preserved origin. In other work, Freud leverages this aspect of the wish to open a new dimension, that of the death-drive. Under the governance of the pleasure principle, the wish seeks out a fundamentally conservative or nostalgic pleasure untrammelled by the accretions and vicissitudes that the Ich-subject subsequently has been forced to contend with. The pleasure principle aims to provide pleasure to the Ich-subject by restoring, as we now well know, what Freud calls 'an earlier state of things', and not the sweet insouciance of an idealised childhood either, but a deep anteriority that is the archaic state from which human beings evolved – the state of the single cell organism, no less. The Ich-subject will experience the greatest pleasure by feeling, like the least complex biological form imaginable, the least agitation or anxiety possible, and, *if* possible, not feeling or experiencing at all. In effect this sets the pleasure principle the task of driving towards death, for the state of death, according to Freud, manifests itself exactly as that state of zero motion and nil pathos. At that first decisive moment rises up a non-synthetic pleasure related mitochondrially to every Ich-subject ultimately issuing from it. The Ich-subject is therefore open to suggestion on two extreme conditions only: first, as we have both explained and contested, that the suggestion doesn't suggest anything new; second, that the suggestion suggests or at least activates something that is, on the contrary, as old as the Ich-subject's primordial origin in the 'deathly' form of early life on the planet . . . Every moment of (suggested) pleasure reads in some infinitesimal way back through a quasi-genetic code to this ultimate origin, each time reaffirming genealogical continuity and the 'speciation' of the human species.

The species is not alone in benefiting. Among the many paradoxes cast off by the theory of the death-drive is that that drive, though a drive toward death, actually serves to underpin the identity of the Ich-subject itself. The drive makes it avoid variation, reins it back from pursuing pleasures not already within it, thus leaving it with only one viable modus vivendi – repetition. True, the drive will allow the Ich-subject a degree of latitude, by indulging its sublimational essays at finding pleasure in altered forms, but beneath such disguises the pleasures remain

the same and always endorsed by death. The Ich-subject only ever repeats, and though, as we were arguing earlier, it may not count for much, all that monotonous travail eventually returns a fruit in the form of identity. Enough repetition and the Ich-subject becomes predictable, which means identifiable. Somewhat as in a fractal pattern, the Ich-subject gains for itself on a miniature level an identity writ large at the level of the species. Such identity, however, is merely the by-product of repetition, and not the metaphysical prize that so many commentators credit it with being. Both to itself and to its observers, the Ich-subject will have accrued a discernible ‘identity’ by virtue of this undeviating labour of death it enacts. What we call identity is nothing but the largely predictable series of deathly forays towards an original pleasure.

Nevertheless, such identity contains a certain force, and it can be mistaken for subjective agency capable in its own right of emitting persuasive ‘suggestions’ to others, and thus participating in an economy. In other words, it doesn’t take much deathly repetition before the Ich-subject not only gains, albeit inadvertently, an identity for itself, but also looks to have a consistent purpose in the world that makes it act in a determined and calculated direction. It appears to be doing things, actively, and in the name of some tacit pledge to the continuation of its own ‘identity’ – identity in quotation marks because, as we have said, it is merely the perceptible surface of a deathly and repetitious drive towards pleasure. Once this happens, the Ich-subject descends into the world of negotiation with other Ich-subjects in order to barter for its own pleasure in a more or less aggressive, more or less sublimated manner. It enters the bestial market of competition. Having arrived there, it will do what it can to bend the social and market forces into the shape of its own gratification, but achieve only mixed success depending on the competitive strength of others trying to do the same. Everyone pursues their own pleasure in a manner consistent enough to render them identifiable, but with sufficient resistance from everyone else that the pleasure is always likely to be compromised.

That prospect calls for a tactical response, a means of influencing the competitive forces at large. Enter persuasion, the most effective tool the Ich-subject can wield to bring others in line with its own wishes, or at least reduce the levels of obstruction. As its fundamental means of weakening the competition, persuasion also doubles as the Ich-subject’s tradecraft of identity, for in an intrinsically selfish marketplace it is only by applying techniques of persuasion that the Ich-subject can advance its cause, namely to win pleasure and influence people (and thereby trigger the side effect which is its semblance of identity). And persuasion, needless to say, will be more effective the more it works like the suggestion

from which in any case it barely differs – the more, that is, that the *Ich*-subject, crudely or subtly, can persuade other *Ich*-subjects that what it's asking for for itself in fact corresponds to and satisfies a wish on the part of those other *Ich*-subjects it needs to bring round. It must dress up what it wants as what others need, and the way to do this is via *suasory* suggestion – suggestion, indeed, in the Freudian sense. The death-drive's irrefusible injunction to secure undisturbed pleasure results down the track in the necessity of persuasion and therefore rhetorical guile. In sum, death makes the *Ich*-subject rhetorical or, to be even more blunt, the origin of rhetoric is death.

Yet Freud would blanch at this. Not because of the deduction that steps from rhetoric to death, probably, but because of seeing suggestion and persuasion elided. On his view, suggestion and persuasion (rhetoric) will diametrically oppose one another. Suggestion has no use for rhetoric, for it does not have to *persuade* the subject of this or that, it has merely to hit on the right thing and then open sesame – the wish springs forth. Freudian suggestion, unlike rhetorical persuasion, has no orders to 'move' the subject from one position to another (as in the rhetorical figure of 'movere'); just finding the right nerve will do the trick. No real labour is required, other than analytic patience and perhaps some deft facilitation. To Freudian eyes it would seem, therefore, that any rhetoric at hand must be the work not of the *Ich* but of the *Über-Ich*, the Superego, the agency with the explicit role of aligning the subject to external norms that by definition run counter to the ego's own trajectory . . . But even then, the Superego works by law or norms, not persuasion, and to this extent it too can transact its business without recourse to rhetorical exertions.

So despite the fact that Freud allows for sublimation – what I have glossed as marketplace activity – he balks at one of its prime consequences. Namely, that sublimation requires the *Ich*-subject not only to find a social grid for its own pleasure to circulate discreetly through, but also to compete with others in a real economy that gives it little choice but to acquire techniques of persuasion – or rhetoric, in other words. Persuasion and the armoury of rhetoric go with the territory of being an *Ich*-subject, or being in the world and on the path to pleasure. Where Freud effectively precludes the possibility of persuasion, and thus of rhetoric (and of ideology, which I am coming to), I am saying precisely that plenty of room exists for these forces to vent their ambiguities. Consequently we must deprive the psychoanalytic notion of suggestion of its somewhat sequestered status as the professional elicitation of a canonic wish. Forming a trinity with persuasion and rhetoric, suggestion belongs in a much rougher sphere, open for necessary reasons to

abuse and manipulation and under the lofty aegis of deathly pleasure. What's more it exploits a structural interval in identity that repression will have created. And even if repression has not created that interval – even if no such thing as repression exists at all – it hardly matters. It is not possible to prove the existence of repression precisely because, if it's working properly, it removes repressed material from the sphere of verification, which means, tragically, that there's no empirical or juridical difference between repressed material and total fiction. The fact that the Ich-subject cannot gauge its own truth, that it cannot judge the veracity of even supposedly authentic suggestions, indicates a kind of snow-blind zone between these suggestions and those that are entirely new, devious and adventitious, where each dazzles into the other. The Ich-subject may in clear conscience appropriate the fictions as thoroughly its own, and up to no limit – its uncertainty makes it capable of adopting a host of opportunistic suggestions. Will these still correspond to its own pleasure and death? Maybe, maybe not.

Critics who detect some ideological force in the Superego have therefore missed the point by several yards. Ideology does not work simply by being superegoically paternalistic: that would be far too legible, too stylised, too proper, like the inscription on an architrave. It is not the same as a set of rules or prohibitions which (Ich-)subjects must adapt to and work around. It is not some manifestation of the father. Nor is it necessarily hegemonic. It works, rather, in the space of persuasion, rhetoric and *doubt*, that is where people are not sure of their own convictions, and for a priori not empirical or positive reasons. Ideology thrives in this crepuscular melt of truth and fiction, where the rift in memory, the skip in alleged self-continuity – ultimately the impossibility of the subject – welcomes in the very possibility of 'suggestion', that is the taking on of another's 'truth' for reasons that cannot always, if ever, be determined. After all, the Ich-subject's judgement has been severely circumscribed as a consequence of the suggestion's inscrutable provenance, its powers of discernment addled, and with reason rolled back like this, a kind of madness provides the target for ideology and suggestion.

I want to be quite clear on this because I believe it represents a radically progressive way of conceptualising ideology. I start from the premise that ideology cannot get off the ground without some means of influencing people (for reasons that should be clear by now I don't want to call them 'subjects'), so that persuasion in one form or another becomes indispensable to it. From this premise one could proceed in a number of more or less conventional directions – I'll give just two, abbreviated, examples:

1. One could argue, still from a broadly psychoanalytic perspective, that ideology moves people by suggesting things to them (social and economic behaviours usually) which they then take on as desirable, whether or not they nurtured such desires in the first place. Essentially, this is ideology as a form of marketing.
2. Or one could argue, from an anti-psychanalytic perspective, that ideological persuasion more closely resembles coercion, whether explicit or implicit, and whether resisted or colluded in by the community it affects. It would therefore occupy a quite separate domain from that of desire and perhaps of psychology in general. Such 'persuasion' involves a supplementary or gratuitous force, meaning that it finds support in some more or less recognised threat.

Both examples depict a hegemonic and somewhat programmatic or operational deployment of ideology, and no doubt one could produce examples of both from everyday life. They imply the prosecution by one set of people of some purpose to which they wish to make another set of people conform. And even where one locates ideological force not with a group of people but displaced versions of them as 'discourse' or 'discursive practice', the rules of purpose and hegemony still broadly apply. I want to qualify and supplement such examples by saying that the 'madness' at the heart of ideology that we are now broaching means that ideological effects can and do occur not always with some purpose in view, or according to a premeditated agenda, but often *for no good reason at all*. The power of suggestion stems from the Ich-subject's not being able to know or decide finally what his or her 'truth' actually is; suggestion holds this indeterminacy open. One does not necessarily have to be persuaded of this or that, for one begins on a bias, divorced from the convictions – those truths falsely ossified into beliefs – that otherwise might have held off persuasion's ideological advances. The Ich-subject is born in ideology, not just because of social conditioning or inherited prejudice, but because its truth cannot be distinguished from fiction; it cannot identify, for structural reasons, the origin or author of what it 'believes'. Indeed, belief is the best it can achieve, the attachment to a position without certainty and therefore without unequivocal reason. If only ideology were as simple as in the examples above! It would be possible to name its origin and perhaps defuse it. But it is precisely because it does not begin 'out there' and because it is not owned – and because a certain madness or causelessness structures it from within – that it provokes so much havoc. After all, if there were absolute knowledge and final certainty, it would find ready acceptance, whereas ideology breeds in the inaccessibility of such certainty and knowledge, or in other words

in the indeterminacy at the centre of a never-completed attempt at self-identity by what were once known as 'ideological subjects'. The persuasion at hand behaves less like the transmission of a purpose than the random adoption of beliefs based in a constitutive uncertainty. Ideology means that we cannot trust what we know, not necessarily because we have been served unreliable or politically interested information, but because we can never be certain of what we know – that's a condition of knowledge, and it everywhere contaminates knowledge with its anathema, namely belief.

To bring these themes into focus and begin my conclusion I want to treat a short passage from a text contemporary with Freud's work on the death instincts, Carl Schmitt's famous 1932 essay, *The Concept of the Political*. As I read it, the central theses of the essay concern themselves with the right of the state to exact death from its enemy in order to preserve itself and, correlatively, to exact death from its own subjects in the effort to do that enemy down. Now, Schmitt's focus, as one might expect, falls on things other than the notion of suggestion *per se*, especially from a psychoanalytic perspective, and other than ideological persuasion. Nevertheless these themes lie at the heart of his argument, as it will be easy to demonstrate.

Midway through the essay, Schmitt writes:

A religious community, a church, can exhort a member to die for his belief and become a martyr, but only for the salvation of his own soul, not for the religious community in its quality as an earthly power; otherwise it assumes a political dimension. Its holy wars and crusades are actions which presuppose an enemy decision, just as do other wars. Under no circumstances can anyone demand that any member of an economically determined society, whose order in the economic domain is based upon rational procedures, sacrifice his life in the interest of rational operations. To justify such a demand on the basis of economic expediency would contradict the individualistic principles of a liberal economic order and could never be justified by the norms or ideals of an economy autonomously conceived. The individual may voluntarily die for whatever reason he may wish. That is, like everything in an essentially individualist liberal society, a thoroughly private matter – decided upon freely.<sup>5</sup>

The paragraph occurs in the course of an insistent argument dealing precisely with 'the concept of the political'. For Schmitt – and I summarise much too hastily – the political begins in hostility and defence and in the identification by a state of an enemy from which it fundamentally distinguishes itself. Indeed that (hostile) identification of the other constitutes, in a generically Hegelian fashion, a founding moment in the identification of itself. The possibility of war or conflict (Schmitt

prefers the Greek ‘polemos’) therefore conditions the state and creates its political character. This political character, however, tips over into the ‘existential’ when that possibility becomes imminent or real. At that point the state takes licence from itself (a kind of ‘mise en abyme’, to be sure) to do that which, politically, it will have thereto only envisioned: namely to kill the enemy and sacrifice its own. The right over life forms the fulcrum between the different orders, the political and the existential; the political marks the possibility of war, the existential its prospect or actuality, but in both the state’s taking of its own citizens’ lives forms an essential horizon.

In the paragraph cited, Schmitt considers illegitimate attempts to claim the lives of subjects. He writes that ‘A religious community, a church, can exhort a member to die for his belief and become a martyr, but only for the salvation of his own soul, not for the religious community in its quality as an earthly power; otherwise it assumes a political dimension.’ Where the political has a right over the lives of subjects – defines itself moreover by it – other social forms or cultural institutions such as religion enjoy no such claim. These must respect the broadly liberal individualism to which such subjects will have effectively subscribed. In this sphere subjects demarcate themselves through their beliefs, and it is only by getting onside of these beliefs, so to speak, that in this case a ‘religious community’ might succeed in influencing its members to give up their lives. Once it steps beyond that mark and asks a member to die for its own benefit, the religious community assumes a political character. More precisely, it assumes a false political character for, unlike the state, it will not have founded itself originally in the face of an enemy’s hostility and its own hostility toward the enemy. But in any case liberal individualism has little regard for the political in Schmitt’s sense: it will practise a ‘negation of the political’ (p. 70), an evasion of the primary laws of hostility and defence upon which Schmitt seeks to build his argument.

We are dealing, then, with subjectivity as a way of maintaining or giving up beliefs, and of an irreducible relationship between such beliefs and death. The fact that I hold beliefs means that from a religious, cultural, liberal and individualist perspective I am invulnerable: factors like these will (or should) never be able to make me die for them. Any death I (voluntarily) embrace will have to countersign, so to speak, the contract I have already instituted with my own beliefs, a contract to which religious, cultural, etc. forms will not be privy and which they cannot affect in any material way. I protect my very being, therefore, with my beliefs. But on the other hand, should the political, for existential reasons, need to claim my life in order to defeat an enemy, then my beliefs will count

for nought. At that hour when the state calls me, I leave my beliefs at home in the name of a higher authority. In sum, my beliefs shield me from everything in one direction, from nothing in another. They both preserve me and expose me to my death, though this relationship is far from symmetrical. The exposure or vulnerability has to weigh much more, for being exposed at all to (political) death means that the beliefs I otherwise hold add up in the final reckoning to very little: at any moment they can be set aside for the sake of the state's preservation. In stylised terms, Schmitt posits a foundation consisting of politics, war, hostility, the existential and the state's right over life, and on top of that foundation, usually ignoring or falsely attempting to negate it, a layer of beliefs, economics, liberalism and the choice over one's own death.

Where do ideology and suggestion fit in this picture? If my earlier argument is correct, even the beliefs I espouse and may use from time to time to shoulder off my exploitation by, for example, religious communities serve not to bolster but undo me as a 'subject'. I cannot be sure of their provenance and that uncertainty – nothing less than the source of the credulity that establishes my stance towards the world – exposes me on my would-be subjective side just as much as I am exposed on the political. One might object that the stakes on either side stack up quite differently – being exposed on the political side, according to the Schmittian formulation, means facing one's death directly, whereas simply being credulous seems at worst ideologically discomfiting. But really, once that credulity has been created, my life is in danger. As soon as I do not know, as soon as I have but belief, I may be moved, and that movement can always take me all the way to my own death. It means I can put my trust in something to the point of dying for it.

The death-drive and ideology meet here. The drive of the death-drive consists in the fact that the credulity cannot be limited, or rather that it's necessarily possible that the vulnerability that comes with uncertainty will end in death. The drive is that indelible possibility, the tendency towards risking life. An 'existential' danger derives from the impossibility of deciding finally on the difference between the truths and fictions suggested, whether these be suggested to us, by us, or both at the same time . . . We don't know where repressed material goes, and we cannot properly identify it. Maybe there's no such thing. Because it cannot be pinned down, we lose our subjective self-relation, a loss that may perhaps find some superficial compensation in the adoption of beliefs, but these beliefs will never be thoroughly appropriated or assimilated by us. Ideology, in this context, becomes a symptom of not being able to tell truth from fiction, even and especially for oneself – a symptom realised in the form of beliefs that remain, in principle, bound for death.

A final word about *Macbeth*. Shakespeare scholars have not been able to decide on whether the prophetic suggestion made by the weird sisters to the Thane of Glamis belonged to him originally or not. This is so, in my view, because *it is not possible* to decide. What's more, an intrinsic bond ties that openness to Macbeth's death, tragically. Tragedy is another name for the drive toward death that commences once, as subjects, we are unconfined and therefore open to suggestion, or vice versa. We can't prevent the absolute risk that takes us towards that death and makes us, perversely, want it.

## Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (I, iii, 138–41), in *The Complete Works*, eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 979.
2. *SE*, XXII, p. 46.
3. Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *The Emotional Tie: Psychoanalysis, Mimesis, and Affect*, trans. Douglas Brick et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 19.
4. J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac Books and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1988).
5. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 48.

# The Rest of Radioactive Light

La matière, étant éternelle, devait avoir des propriétés éternelles, comme la configuration, la force d'inertie, le mouvement et la divisibilité. (Voltaire)

The philosopher should begin by meditating on photography, that is the writing of light, before setting out toward a reflection on an impossible self-portrait. (Derrida)

Like the light from a dead star, waves still emanate toward us from, among other times, the early seventeenth century – from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, for instance, as we saw in the last chapter, or from *Hamlet*. In some sense the play remains contemporary with us, though in a sense quite different from the broadly humanist assertion of its universal and continuing relevance.

The persistence of an old thing, even a dead one, the continuance of light over time, the concept of the photograph, the 'radioactivity' of artworks, *Hamlet*, Samuel Beckett and, again, Freud – these are the themes I want to braid together in this final chapter. And if it is possible to combine them (obviously it is) then this possibility itself has some relevance which can serve as a sort of protocol for what follows: the condition for combining such historically and culturally different material must be a potential contemporaneity of each thing with every other. Their historical and cultural difference restrains them insufficiently to stop them coming together. Though time separates Shakespeare and Beckett, for example, it cannot do so absolutely or there would be no chance now for a comparative analysis. They can be grafted into the here and now and onto one another. The past they inhabited and in which they had their productive origin does not preclude this; it does not determine them enough to proscribe the contemporaneity which makes academic discourse about them, together or in isolation, possible – and any approach to such artworks that wishes to remain militantly historicist would have to meet such an objection. One might also note that the

faculty of contemporaneity tolerates in its principle varying degrees of hybridity and contamination. That is, although it may appear somewhat random to combine Beckett, Shakespeare and Freud, the contemporaneity at issue means nothing if not the possibility of remote, perhaps inappropriate combinations. Once the origin of any one artwork fails to withstand the artwork's departure into another time, anything may commingle with anything else. Shakespeare becomes our contemporary not by virtue of remaining who he is, not through any eternal valency, not through continuing relevance – though these things could also be true – no, he becomes *contemporary* only in the exposure to this risk of miscegenation and therefore distortion. Shakespeare persists within and only within the dimension of mutation, continuing in his identity only to the extent that that identity alters. What persists is both Shakespeare and not-Shakespeare or rather Shakespeare as necessarily no longer himself (and therefore as in principle dead). His non-self-identity delivers 'him' to us. This fact is unpleasant, but it is precisely the unpleasantness which interests me and which will guide these thoughts.

At the heart of these thoughts lies a question as to whether artworks are live or dead things, whether their capacity to outlive their creators signals a kind of immortality, and if so whether this should be called a life or rather a maintained death like that of an Egyptian mummy, a death kept alive, a kind of life support implying the presence of technique in the art of survival. It is a difficult question to decide because despite what I have just claimed as my protocol regarding the necessary distortion of artworks over time, the more prevalent opinion says more or less the opposite, that is that a thing remains only insofar as it remains itself. After all, how can something *remain* if it remains something *other* than itself? Surely that goes against the sense of remaining?<sup>1</sup>

When Freud writes in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' of the death-drive,<sup>2</sup> it is essentially this latter view that underpins it. The state of rest, for Freud, being the state the death-drive drives toward, presupposes and implies the self-identity of the thing resting. Moreover, the thing resting or persisting, the model for which is 'the organism' in his essay, becomes itself more, achieves a more authentic self-identity, comes into its own precisely through (a return to) the state of rest. Or at least the state of rest furnishes those conditions most conducive to the greatest pleasure (strictly speaking, *the least unpleasure*) of the organism, where, as we know, the latter has been defined psychoanalytically as bent on return to inertia and as such the agent of its own pleasure-seeking or wish-fulfilment. To the extent it will have exercised maximally such agency in achieving it, the organism becomes itself fully in the state of rest. This I call the organism's 'self-identity' though such a term suggests

an ontological and essentialist character not necessarily proper to the solely hedonist teleology the death-drive orients itself by. Self-identity and self-pleasure may be separable phenomena: it's not for certain a self that is pleasured by pleasure, for all we can posit is a drive which, qua drive, qua pulsional force, has perhaps the capacity to disrespect, ignore or even cancel the selfness of any thing piloted by it.

Roughly speaking, though, Freud gives an account of remaining as remaining-in-self-identity. The death-drive works for the pleasure of the organism it navigates by reducing the turbulence around it and with it the unwelcome infiltrations of alterity in general. Disturbance comes from the outside, necessarily, even where the outside has been incorporated; conversely, the inside of the organism maintains its own undisturbed pleasure (at the more complex, though congruent, level of the human psyche techniques of repression are used to muffle and bury outside disturbances – these get interiorised radically so as to quarantine them, making of them an outside within the inside of the mind . . . I shall come to this in a moment). Insofar as the organism persists undisturbed the outside does not affect it, achieving only *with* and *by* itself that repleteneess which marks, in effect, the repleteneess of itself. The only problem is that the price paid for this pleasant self-presence is death.

Or is it? A paradox clouds Freud's theory at this point. It seems that self-identity comes only with its own demise in the form of absolute inertia. For what does a remaining-in-self-identity amount to if the whole thing is a resting-in-death? Is self-identity viable as death? Or more exactly, can death accommodate self-identity without destroying it, if death derives from the finitude of such presence as makes self-identity possible? Are the dead more completely themselves than when they were alive, given that they are now, finally, unreachable by the besetting othernesses of language, society, love that living will have foisted on them? – All of which begs the reverse question as to whether 'life' and 'self-identity' therefore repel each other, life constantly drawing the self away from itself and thrusting it into the a priori space of negotiation with non-self, jamming its identity and swivelling its privacy round into the glare of economy.

Insofar as time can be manifested only by change in phenomena, the lack of change occurring in the pleasurable state of the resting organism, call it life or death or a half-way house, may provide the illusion of a timelessness, a possibility which becomes more interesting at the level of the psyche – and I want to move from organic to psychic persistence as a route to the question of the persistence of artworks (specifically literary and photographic) and their identity. Freud's point about the death-drive is that it constitutes a practically unavoidable corollary to

the pleasure principle. We know that the Freudian psyche, primordially defined by the need to fulfil its wishes (the pleasure principle), learns to its dismay that this need, or rather the selfish pursuit of its immediate satisfaction, provokes social disapproval and prohibition and is therefore ineffective. The psyche sees ahead of it an unpleasant detour through the realm of social compromise and must suffer the agitations of exteriority where wishes have to be dressed up and socialised – a detour unpleasant enough, in fact, that merely getting back home to itself brings it pleasure, hence the organic craving for return. Pleasure adds up to no more than the reduction of the unpleasure felt during this sojourn into the world; no positive pleasure exists, only the neutral state of least molestation. Society, as superego, will have imposed mediacy upon the psyche, and though the maturer psyche will have learned to glean some sublimated pleasure in this dimension, the sublimation can never shake free from its representative function – that is, sublimation is bound to represent unconscious wishes in less shameful form, and in fact this bind to the Unconscious conditions it. The space of mediacy co-extends precisely with the Unconscious where the wishes are repressed to hide them from society's disapprobation. This 'space' of mediacy in fact is temporal – after all, there can be no mediation without duration. The mediating of wish-fulfilment takes time. And the co-extensiveness of repressed wishes in the Unconscious with the mediation of them in temporal society implies a certain temporalisation of the Unconscious too. However, such co-extensiveness of unconscious with superegoic time need not mean that they age in the same way or have the same duration, for the co-extensiveness at issue is formal, not phenomenal, and moreover this distinction between formal and phenomenal even defines them as such: it holds as a cardinal difference between the two that the superego courses through the phenomenal realm in social experience whereas the unconscious has an entirely non-phenomenal make-up and so much so that it requires skilful and often fruitless coaxing – psychoanalysis itself – to bring it to light. It would not be too much to say that the non-phenomenality of the Unconscious *causes* psychoanalysis or at least brings it into being; and that it is intolerance for hiddenness from the phenomenal realm that stirs psychoanalysis into inventing itself as an art of illumination and exposure. Psychoanalysis, we might say, itself is an art of light, a psychophotographics. The superego, being phenomenological, endures time; the Unconscious, or id, functions as reagent to the enduring, formally temporal because indexed to time but lacking the phenomenal attributes that would present it in time as such. By way of metaphor one might say that the Unconscious lies at the relatively still hub of a wheel whose rim whirrs at the superegoic rate of diurnal change.

In this very specific sense the Unconscious can be called timeless. Sheltered from atrophy and phenomenal perishing, its 'slow time' has a kind of Einsteinian viscosity to it that keeps its images forever young – which would corroborate from another, more structural point of view the inveterate infantilism of the id that Freud will have detailed from a more genetic one. But in another respect we have strayed from Freud quite far. For his hypothesis regarding the deathly implications of the pleasure principle refers much more to ego than id. Really the id is there to free up the superego for normal social functioning, repressing unseemly wishes while the superego represents them in more decent form. It is the ego, rather, that has the role of pleasure-seeker, the hedonist, and *its* stability is what counts. The death-drive protects the life of the ego, paradoxically, by giving it the chance to shrink from the superegoic life-world. Collaterally the id is doing the work that allows the superego to do the work that allows the ego to get some sublimated pleasure. Instinct clashes with sublimation, nature with nurture, for the instinct, the drive of the ego, prefers unsublimated, deathly pleasure to its sublimated, social representation – but just as well the superego does counter the ego, because left to its own devices the ego would kill itself in pursuing such raw pleasure. The psyche as a whole judders into time and is made to live, protecting itself *by* exhibiting itself (against its instincts); it may not be given pleasure but it is given life. Being brought into time, however, includes exposure to mortality, for the subjective experience of time is atrophy. In gaining life, the psyche also gains death – and there is your side effect, in the bargain which the superegoic pressure of social time forces the psyche into. But at least the bargain has the merit of moral clarity, and as such contrasts with the ambiguous state of life-death which as we have seen an unimpeded death-drive as will to inertia would result in.

The psyche inches forward in a warped frame where time and untime hold each other to ransom. The 'normal' psyche manages to sacrifice its yearning for permanence to the interest of daily life, necessity to contingency. (I use the word 'interest' deliberately: the psyche has an interest in the world insofar as a part of itself, its superego, is already a 'part' of the world and existing among it (as the etymology of the word 'interest' as 'inter-esse' suggests); the more economicistic or speculative aspect of interest also pertains in that the superego operates as the psyche's bargaining function, ever calculating the ratio of social effort to the sublimated pleasure it promises.)

At this point and by way of transition, a couple of hypotheses both pertaining now to the concept of the artwork and both in the form of analogy:

1. First hypothesis: *Interpretation corresponds to the superego*. Interpretation can only post-date the artwork it addresses. Empirically, this is what happens; conceptually, a certain modernity or futurity inheres in the idea of interpretation, whence perhaps the competitiveness that characterises it, the urge to colonise the virgin time ahead of it. There will have been time before interpretation. Interpretation, like the superego, must dwell in a late time that is also a very new one – late because a temporal delay stalls the getting back to the artwork whose analogue is the wish (neither interpretation nor superego can close a temporal gap conditioning them); new because it is late, in fact, where the crisis of lateness turns into the advantage of newness, that is of inventiveness, adaptability, convention, cunning, appraisal, opportunity, judgement and so on – all those denominations of both superegoic and interpretative venture.

We may note as a second aspect of this first hypothesis that because interpretation will have brought the artwork into its own interpretative time and updated it, it will also be socialising it, or making it conform to the standards of the day, requiring it to behave conformably to certain expectations. Interpretation holds the superegoic power of legitimising the artwork. It will make it answer to certain readerly demands as to how it presents itself. It will make it acceptable in the cultural terms prevailing. In this respect interpretation acts as the artwork's superego – which tallies with the notion of the superego hawking life to the ego, for without interpretation, without a certain cognition, without thereby a risk of (mis)appropriation and self-distortion, the artwork does not exist (a commonplace of Reception Theory). It also agrees with our protocol according to which the condition of persistence is alteration, that only potential mutation makes radioactive permanence a possibility. One could take the analogy further still – to, for example, the play of superegoic control with egoic and aesthetic pleasure on the part of the interpreter – but this would make an unpleasant digression!

2. Second hypothesis: *the will to permanence corresponds to the artwork*. With this hypothesis I wish to embark on the next stage of my argument. It is another commonplace that an artwork outlives its creator. For sensing just how commonplace one might try imagining the reverse: what would an artwork be that died before its creator? This reverse question also reveals how peculiar, and perhaps inappropriate, a vocabulary of life and death can be when applied to artworks . . . after all, how does one date the death of, say, a photograph?

Consider for a moment Derrida's work on remaining, resting and the disfiguration they comport. In particular, I have in mind his reading of *Hamlet* in *Spectres of Marx*.<sup>3</sup> The at-first-sight incongruous 'comparative analysis' of Shakespeare's play and Marx's (and others') writings

is justified through a common element – that of the spectre, precisely. (Not that this becomes the key to unlocking both texts – and not only because of the necessary obliquity of any reading but also because this ‘theme’ itself, if it is one, this ‘concept’ of the spectre may be just the sort of thing to tax to its limits any phenomenology of understanding.) Derrida’s conceit is that the so-called end of Marxism cannot be so clear cut, for Marxism, like any cultural phenomenon, any ‘event’, had never been present enough to itself to be able to simply die. It was haunted by its own non-self-coincidence long before its supposed surcease, hence a conditioning spectrality which leads Derrida to align or misalign it (the distinction fades away) with the ghosts of *Hamlet*.

Non-self-coincidence, it could be argued, *produces* time. At least, non-coinciding requires the time in which it does not happen, so to speak. Conversely, one would not even be able to infer such a thing as time were it not for the change in phenomena we have already averted to: this ‘change’ in phenomena means their non-self-coincidence, their differing from themselves and postponement thereby of resolute identity. Time exists nowhere outside such phenomenal change; therefore it is the *form* of non-self-coincidence. One implication to be drawn from this – which Derrida draws though from a different angle – is that time, as a form of non-self-coincidence, cannot also take the form of absolute presence, for non-self-coincidence precludes absolute presence and self-presence. Time must have only a ghostly quasi-presence. Marxism for instance, as historical event, can reach a final end no more than any other, and this includes obsolete events whose ‘death’ is merely dormancy.

But what of Shakespeare’s ghosts, be they from *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, or elsewhere? What of each text as an artwork? True, the ghosts lend dramatic form to what for Derrida constitutes a structural necessity – so, one could deduce, the plays enact the opposite of drama, the other pole of presentation and theatre, for its dimension is one of structural necessity, supposedly pre-phenomenal . . . Such imbrication of structure and theme applies equally to the inactive persistence not just of the dead king’s ghost but of Prince Hamlet himself both during his postponement of revenge and in his post-mortem state of silent rest, coupled with the play itself which in its mutated multiplication lives on across the western world, thriving so strongly through repetition and allusion that it would take thousands of deaths to kill it off were that ever possible. On these grounds there can be no such thing as a Derridean aesthetics, for the principle of living-on affects artistic and cultural moments – and indeed everyday moments – alike; no special case can be made for artistic timelessness. An artwork forms just another part of its creator’s legacy and may be referred to or remembered no more uniquely than his



Samuel Beckett, photographed by John Minihan (1985) © John Minihan.  
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or her physical image, name, property, etc. I say this with the proviso, however, that a certain artistry already shapes persistence *per se*. For if being-in-time amounts to the risk of certain death, and this is a natural condition, then persistence through or beyond death implies a certain technology, artistry, skill – a technistic amplification of the natural possibilities of life that is technology period. For what is technology if not the magnification of nature beyond its natural limit – into the space of natural death as identical with keeping it alive? At which point technology converges with memory: Derrida reveals in *Mémoires pour Paul de Man* the untenability of the opposition natural/technical as applied to human beings, for the faculty of memory which defines them, which is natural to them, provides a technique for the prolongation of life through memorialising others (and one's own earlier life).<sup>4</sup>

A ghost is 'unnatural' in this sense too. It is that prolongation of life beyond its limit that is identical with memory, with its being-remembered. A ghost that cries 'Remember me!' thus expresses its own condition. An unremembered ghost does not a ghost make, for it will have ceased to haunt. In *Hamlet*, such haunting from the past as beleaguers the Prince has its parallel in the haunting from the future upon which he speculates, the dreams in the sleep of death analoguing exactly the ghost as prolongation-beyond-life of life; in *Macbeth*, as we saw in the

last chapter, the haunting by the future shapes the hero's very 'thought'. Such residues are nothing but the side effects of life as non-self-coincidence, the form of time. And we may also redescribe this condition in the psychoanalytic terms we were using earlier. For it was precisely non-self-coincidence, as diremption of the psyche, that took form as time too. The psyche had, through the fabrication of an unconscious, to become unavailable to itself, beyond its own reach, in order to live in the temporal world. It had to lose sight of itself, develop an attribute beyond the apprehension of its very own consciousness, had to agree to schism of *itself*, a schism whose cause or effect – hard to say which – whose environment could only be time because only time offered the conditions for mediating the wishes that founded and motivated it. The psyche began living beyond and after itself. It began living beyond its natural or instinctual state which was to balk at time altogether. Its living was thus already living-on or surviving, haunted by its own repressed wishes and moreover deploying what must be called a technique, that of superegoic social skill, in order to do so.

In both Freud and Derrida, then, time, non-self-coincidence and technology come together as inseparable, mutually indispensable notions. Each is the form of every other. A breach in identity becomes the prerequisite of its own somewhat artificial continuance. It divides itself so as to remain, like radioactive waste (except that radioactive waste reduces where identity need not). The difference is that Freud views the whole scenario as motivated, even defined, by its motivation, for it ensues from wishing. He will thus have fashioned a metaphysics, a poetics of origin and origination which Derrida's work self-consciously eschews in favour of a rigorous suspense. Such a metaphysics must evoke the chance of return for this belongs with the idea of origin. Freudian time, in other words, has in its very progress the character of potential return; it harbours the promise of going back as much as forward. The psychological experience of being in time involves being tantalised by this curvature, this prospect of an alleviating regression and equilibrium. In both *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* this curvature manifests itself perhaps in the irony of both heroes and their situation: they must go forward in order to go back, act in order to rest, kill in order to lay the ghost, and this crisis provokes the ironic attenuation of their thoughts, for irony is both ahead of its time in its modernity, its fashionability and inventiveness but pathetic in its harping on the past.

But then both plays – and one might venture to say tragedy in general – appear to have this curved shape to them. Insofar as *Hamlet* dramatises a judicial process, the exposing of a crime and its restitution, the tragedy takes place in view of a return to equilibrium and balance whose

symbolic form would be the scales of justice; in *Macbeth*, the state of rest becomes as prized as the crown. More generally still, drama, be it tragedy or comedy, presents the interruption of a prior, and deferral of a later, state of rest. The pleasure of drama corresponds to the return to this latter state as it is played out . . . Though if it is 'played out' we can revert to Derrida and describe it in non-psychological, non-motivated terms just as successfully. For what is the playing out if not an exercise in skill, in the player's art which is even advertised within the play itself -? The form of time is mere technique, technique of irony, self-masking, dissimulation and manipulation. The form of time *must* be that of (inexact) simulation, repetition and reproduction if it remains forever enthralled to its own prior incompleteness in non-self-coincidence. It will never break free sufficiently to adopt an entirely 'natural attitude'.

A view of the origin always lights up this curvature where time slows, magnetised by its own anteriority and segmenting identities across itself like photographs in series become a blur . . . And it is a discussion of photographs, in fact, I would like to end with, or rather a close reading of one photograph in particular, of Samuel Beckett taken by John Minihan in Paris in December 1985.<sup>5</sup> In the prose especially one can track a movement of two-steps-forward-one-step-back, a cautionary need both syntactically and mentally to monitor by dis and re-assemble the phrasal units, indistinguishable from physical moments, by which the text makes its ginger, quizzical progress. Stillness and rest punctuate each phrase; the sentences caught, like Macbeth or Hamlet, between conclusion and inconclusion. And like the patterns described by chaos theory, the text pulls on itself in differing repetition, thus stifling or inhibiting the urge for inauguration and diminishing the transitivity that signals the presence of sovereign subjects. Whence the tendency to subsume subjectivity under textuality, intention under repetition and recapitulation. The texts lie still, their metabolism thickened almost to congealing point, their heart-rate as inert as a hibernating animal. Scarcely could the distinction between living and dying become more mud-like. Here, for example, are the first dozen lines or so of 'Still':

Bright at last close of a dark day the sun shines out at last and goes down. Sitting quite still at valley window normally turn head now and see it the sun low in the southwest sinking. Even get up certain moods and go stand by western window quite still watching it sink and then the afterglow. Always quite still some reason some time past this hour at open window facing south in small upright wicker chair with armrests. Eyes stare out unseeing till first movement some time past close through unseeing still while still light. Quite still again then all quite quiet apparently till eyes open again while still light though less. Normally turn head now ninety degrees to watch sun which if

already gone then fading afterglow. Even get up certain moods and go stand by western window till quite dark and even some evenings some reason long after. Eyes then open again while still light and close again in what if not quite a single movement almost.<sup>6</sup>

‘Still light’, he writes, three times. One could perhaps describe these lines as a photology of the death-drive, the fading maintenance of a late light that affords some cooling pleasure. The text itself, like the ‘afterglow’ of still light, will have styled itself a prolongation-technique. It keeps the dying light alive, repeating and reproducing it, phrase and image. This reproduction of light means that the phrases are almost literally photographing each other, sending out small flashes in the gloom of the prose. It is so technical, so mechanical, this life-support system that one calls a text, and finds its figure perhaps in the robotic comic lyricism of a phrase like, ‘Normally turn head now ninety degrees to watch sun which if already gone then fading afterglow’. There you have the becoming-technical of life, where life means both subjective humanity and simulating text, and where the technique allows for both experience and re-experience of a dying light that has sustained its life and which in its very dying is giving pleasure from its impossible lyricism and beauty. Repeated fading light as pleasure, ‘still light’. Its tragic poetics thereby includes comedy by default, the ‘pleasure’ *as* technique for survival including a certain comedy, for the technological prolongation of life suggests a kind of disrespect for organic living, an intolerance for it which allows inhuman mechanisms to have their day, incongruous in their garish efficiency and stupidity.

Now if we turn to the photograph we see this still light in another form. A photograph maintains light over time, the rest of light, the leftover of it together with its repose in aesthetic form. It is a technical means of keeping light alive as image in time. Samuel Beckett lives on in this photograph and thus outlives himself, and if this is possible then there must have been a difference between himself and himself allowing for that discrepancy. By way of analogy the photograph corresponds to the proper name according to Derrida’s analysis of it: both photoportrait and proper name appear identical to their subject but in fact are perfectly detachable. Neither need die with the death of their subject and to this extent must have been and remain independent of that subject. Neither can take us to the subject’s identity, and for the further reason that just as the question ‘is this Samuel Beckett?’ may refer merely to the name of the name of Samuel Beckett – and one will never know – so the same question as applied to this photograph, ‘is this Samuel Beckett?’, refuses to yield its equivocation, for it is both Samuel Beckett but at the

same time only a photograph of him. The artifice, the phototechnique, at once frustrates and sustains the identity.

One notices immediately an aesthetic trick or innovation or anti-classical ruse – the photoportrait was taken landscape rather than portrait style (horizontal rather than vertical). Where portrait style accommodates and enhances the self-possession of its subject, flattering its egological humanism and sovereignty, a portrait taken landscape style immediately throws its subject into the world, levelling it both literally and phenomenologically. This takes emphasis in the photograph before us from the shunting to one side of the subject instead of its occupying the centre, which makes room for the perspective in the left-hand portion of the frame. In addition to these elements of depreciation the subject stands at the *right* side of the frame where we normally read photographs from the left, so again a certain loss of priority is implied. These elements create a pathos and worldliness, an everyman disprivilege borne out further by the quotidian, vaguely laboristic or at most casual clothing that Beckett wears, and the humdrum blankness of the grey weather that could betoken just about any time of day. His somewhat peasant air meets both corroboration and contrast in its background, for while the trees in the avenue leading away or toward him give a rustic sense, their height and line, measured along with tall buildings and lamps, provide a grandeur and Parisian elegance that lend Beckett's presence by contrast an unease and inappropriateness. The intensity of Beckett's expression, again one of both peasant or highlander or shepherd asceticism blended with intellectualist acumen, also carries this contrast with the confident stroll of the avenue behind, the insouciance of what looks like a river walk set against the subject's apparent loneliness, though in a sense the eyes also concentrate that measured pace as the point – or *punctum* as Barthes would put it<sup>7</sup> – where the photograph converges: the avenue leads calmly into those eyes and is gathered there. The eyes gain elevation from the height in the perspective behind and this reinforces their quality as birdlike, meditatively preyful, centring a head that is equally birdlike with its crow's feet, sharp, beaked nose, feather of hair, thinness, brittleness and hardness. These latter elements of concentration, and particularly Beckett's position in the frame which itself becomes an internal frame, an internal lower-right corner, bring the subject's presence forward almost out of the photograph: an effect of ontological prominence is won even as it is lost on account of the previous elements mentioned. Overall the photograph works by an equivocal motion of simultaneous subdual and intensification of subjectivity (in a manner reminiscent of Van Gogh).

There are also issues of survival and light that are raised by this

portrait, thus corresponding to the text of 'Still'. Already there exists a connection, however, in a further play of subjectivity's equivocal status. The avenue as movement, the bust as stillness, these are the competing energies of the picture, just as 'Still' pivots between fixity and growth whereby subjectivity is inferred more from the transitions around it, from the motion or change in its ambient light, than from its own intentional properties; in the photograph the blurring of the background, combined with the sense of progression and procession, traffic and ambulation afforded by the avenue, puts a kind of speed into the picture against which the arrested stillness of the subject also achieves some kind of acceleration, as though he has been fired to the front of it. This dual play expresses itself too in the meshing of fatigue and alertness in the face, suggestive of a life as survival. In this respect the river walk, if it is a river, the promenade is less recreational – it is cold, for Beckett wears a scarf and there are no leaves on the trees – and more one of self-subsistence and endurance, making the subject tramp-like, wizened. Agedness factors into this aspect of survival, in the lines of the desiccated face, a sense of living beyond oneself, just beyond the minimum, that ties in with the general absurdity of contingency that so marks Beckett's written work. Contingent too because of the hollowness of the day in the photo, the aimlessness of a man free to promenade in the day, free from appointments and the necessities of economic life and yet beset by them, forced to the side of his own life by them, compelled to be out in the world, literally outside and in the phenomenal realm as surviving. Such would be the grey light of the superego which has dragged the psyche into the realm of uncertain satisfaction, carrying its interiority forth into the public realm as this shot depicts. Beckett's closed privacy is exposed in the most public air of a boulevard which even then fails to console on account of its apparent emptiness and depopulation, where Paris resembles an Eastern European communist capital more than itself. And what maintains this state and prolongs it is the stare into the camera lens itself, the interface with the technical that keeps the subject stopped in its course through the outside. Beckett stops to present himself to the camera, there is the time of a technical interruption where Beckett becomes himself before the apparatus, framed and therefore different, distinct from the Beckett he was until a moment ago.

Within this technical space a certain infinity opens up. It is figured in the photo itself in several ways – in the preservation of the aged face we have already noted, also in the long march of the avenue disappearing perspectively like tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, and, with the lamplight to the left of Beckett's head, the possible configuring of him as a sentry on a vigil going to and fro from the light with his slightly

Roman air, or even as a prisoner taking ‘exercise’ along a meaninglessly demarcated stretch of road, or a ghost emerging from the nebula. Here is a ‘still light’: that lamp, is it on or is it off? The light seems to remain in the half-light of those days when it never gets bright enough for the lamps to sense the difference from evening. The camera then photographs this remaining light and keeps it alive.

Above all one feels perhaps the photograph’s ashen texture, where heat and light have been burnt out, and where the whiteness, like the whiteness of Beckett’s hair, signals both decay and a parodically new steady state. It has come into time in order to resist time and perhaps exemplifies how artworks – as technological constructs and as such no longer to be distinguished sharply from the living – deploy their structure.

### Notes

1. An ‘aporia’ rules over this question inasmuch as two contradictory criteria must be met in order for self-identity to remain. On the one hand, as our protocol proposes, self-identity must offer itself up to distortion in order to survive in time – it must survive as something other than itself; but on the other hand *yet at the same time* identity may be inferred (and this is the more classical argument) only from the integrity over time of the thing in question.
2. *SE*, XVIII, pp. 1–67.
3. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994).
4. See Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires pour Paul de Man* (Paris: Galilée, 1988).
5. Samuel Beckett: *Photographs by John Minihan* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1995), p. 85.
6. Samuel Beckett, *Collected Shorter Prose 1945–1980* (London: John Calder, 1984), p. 183.
7. See Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1980).

## Approaching Death

I stand before a monk who stands before me.

*Mönch* is a sculpture by Katharina Fritsch, first exhibited in the pre-millennial year of 1999. It is polyester, painted a matt black, and measures 192 cm by 63 cm by 46 cm – life size – being a cast of the artist's friend, Frank Fenstermacher (a richly appropriate name, perhaps, for this candid window-maker has provided the raw material for a uniquely opaque object).

I have seen it twice, in different galleries, though it feels more apt to say that I have *visited* it twice, or even visited *him* twice, except that, on the second occasion, the recognition belonged solely to me (that's part of an essential asymmetry we shall explore – that this artwork was not capable of recognising me as I recognised it). The word 'visit' might be a kind of key to the preceding chapters of this book. I visited the monk, which means that I saw him – 'visit' derives from the Latin verb *videre*, to see. But 'visit', at least in English, contains a peculiar counter-current of the invisible. It touches on 'visitation' with its sense of supernatural presence, a presence that is 'there' without being evident. This sense of the supernatural, or of an event that arrives obscurely from elsewhere, perhaps somewhere frightening, also imbues 'visit' when used, albeit archaically, as a verb, as in 'vengeance was visited upon them'. So, I visited the monk twice, and each time I both did and did not see him. Even as he stood there 'exhibited', as he submitted to my gaze and that of a thousand other eyes, alongside his vulnerability and complicity sounded another tone, more imperious, that made it clear that *Mönch* could not be, and would never be, completely seen. That tone owed to more than the absorbing, denying, forbidding blackness of the figure. I could visit him a million times and never thoroughly have visited him.

Why does that offer a clue about death? Because we both visit death and are visited by it. We observe it when we see someone die, and we visit it with thoughts and speculations. But even in these visits, we never

actually see it. One cannot point at 'death': no apodictic register exists in which to proclaim its appearance. We can point at pictures and other representations, or may witness events of death such as murders, accidents or warfare, but in all these death never appears as such. It may be (see Chapter 1, 'Memento Mori') that individuals see death in the hour of their dying, but by definition we have no report of what that death looked or felt like, for those individuals are now gone – and I do not count near-death experiences, nor the accounts gleaned from them, on the criterion that death must be absolutely irreversible. Something about death makes it invisible and unvisitable, which is why 'visit' helps as a term, signalling this absence of death even at the site of its own occurrence. We may visit death, but when we find ourselves visited by it, it remains strangely inapparent.

Fritsch's sculpture makes especially intense the play, common perhaps to all sculptures that represent people, between the quick and the dead, and this provides a second key. We should not automatically take death to be the reverse of life, and I don't mean simply because we are mortal. Our mortality suggests that death completes life, bringing it to a close, rather than facing it as its opposite, and we have our being on the condition it is finite. So the two, life and death, already envelop each other, and it would be foolish to maintain that either could 'exist' independently. Some might construe their interdependence diacritically, that is in the same way you can't think black without white, you can't think life without death. I have no objection to such statements of an intrinsic connection, nor to the theoretical developments in recent decades regarding memory and mourning and the irreducible confusion in those states between life and death: how, for example, are the dead kept alive by us, and in us, through our memories of them? If we can remember them, and *could have* remembered them, moreover, even before their demise, does that not imply they were dead in our memory long before the end of their days?<sup>1</sup> Again, life and death seem only to infiltrate each other. But if they truly are so enmeshed in each other, Fritsch's sculpture leads us to that conclusion along a rather different path. Just as much as it says something about sculptural bodies as alive and breathing, *Mönch* tells us something about human bodies as deathly. Of course it has long been a commonplace in discourses on art to praise the apparent breathingness of the sculpted body or the illusion of wind moving among garments (a metaphorical association with God breathing life into man never lags far behind), and one could easily press *Mönch* into the service of such a discourse, not least because it enjoys the advantage of having been cast from a real person – the verisimilitude only intensifies its uncanny presence. So far, so classical. But the inverse possibility has

yet to be accepted or even mooted very much, namely that the life and breath of the beholder, rather than that of the sculpture, becomes the issue, thus rendering the relationship of sculpture to beholder, of inanimate to animate, less one of difference than of shared features, as in a Venn diagram with overlapping circles. For in the semi-mirroring effect involved in looking at a life-like, life-size sculpture, and in the stillness or arrest that the sculpture induces in the beholder, a kind of reverse energy flows. As he comes alive, so I become dead. The figure indeed arrests me, demonstrating in a particularly tensile manner how all formal artworks appear to (want to) arrest us; it makes the artistic arrest acute: it stops us. And as we freeze or slow before it – a thicker time-zone exists around him, a different gravity or viscosity – we endure a ceremoniousness now proper to both of us, sculpture and beholder. The quality of our own aliveness mutates, pulled toward a slow, simple coincidence with the sculpture, one that begins to be quite deathly, more like a *Mit-Tod* than a *Mitsein*. Which is partly to do with the breath: the sculpture reflects back on the automatism of breathing that belongs to 'live' human beings, a mechanism in every sense at the heart of being, and so reframes us, in turn, as 'deathly' and even 'technological' in the supposedly vital moment of respiration. Hence the second key: our death-in-life experience increases in artistic/formal/technical encounters.

For it is precisely a matter of form, art and technology. Not only can artworks seem alive ('they moved or seemed to move', to quote Yeats),<sup>2</sup> and thereby throw doubt on the relationship between life and death, but conversely, though more controversially, our lives – by which I mean human being – may contain artistic, formal or technical elements that tie them back to death in ways still little explored. I combine 'artistic, formal or technical', fully recognising that these may constitute an unlikely or even incompatible grouping (not that similar groupings have not been made before – I am thinking of two seminal texts, Paul Celan's 'The Meridian' and Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction').<sup>3</sup> In my eyes, what the artistic, the formal and the technical share is repeatability, and indeed what makes breathing 'technical', despite variations in its rhythm, is its machine-like or technical repetitiousness and endurance. What's technical can be repeated, such as a computer program, and what's formal can be repeated, such as the steps of a dance. The case of the artwork is more problematic. For a start, it can be repeated in the sense that, once made, it embodies a 'style', an artistic way of seeing or being, and in this it sets down its own imitability, thereby allowing it to be repeated – which is ironic because a style connotes something original or unique, yet that individuality is precisely what allows it to be identified and

thus reproduced. But there is something else, and it is where a third key from Katharina Fritsch comes in. That ceremoniousness felt within the monk's radius also points towards ritual and repetition. On the surface, such repetition might have a solely religious character – the repetition of words in prayer, for example, or the monastic routine. Beneath that, this figure indicates what I would call the eternal return of the death-drive or, in more strictly Freudian terms, the compulsion to repeat. Though the monk stands there in his singularity, isolate and discrete, he nevertheless seems caught in a sequence – not just that of a religious observance, nor even that owing to the sculpture's being a cast and so suggesting infinite reproduction, but rather an insistence, even a law, of repetition, and of a repetition that leads not to any illumination or any growing knowledge, but merely to an innocuous and ongoing positing or reposing of itself.<sup>4</sup> The monk can posit himself again and again without any content accruing to him, so to speak, without any abounding of character, without any shoring up of identity. It's like the repetition of a zero, or at least a minimal quiddity, the pulsing of a near-nothing, which makes me think of it as a kind of rhythm of death. It connects with the notion of the visit, for even if a visit appears to have been undertaken volitionally, it always takes place in response to some prior recognition of a duty, itself an instance, therefore, of a law of repetition. It requires that we come forward and present ourselves, but nothing further. The visit has a non-appetitive rhythm that corresponds to the continuous falling-into-place of *Mönch*.

These 'keys' from Katharina Fritsch are no more than that. I believe that *Mönch* concentrates a number of issues concerning the death-drive that accord with the tenor and thematics of this book. And although they lie outside my scope it also brings up a range of moral questions: that rope around the waist, for example – it suggests asceticism, it suggests church bells, but it also suggests the hangman's noose and the sexual fetish. The clothing may be as much costume as professional uniform, which calls to mind a mimicry and an auto-eroticism that undermine the religious vocation. And while I would not say that *Mönch* stands *beyond* good and evil, I would claim that it confounds the two, in every sense . . . My focus has fallen instead on the aesthetic, the philosophic and the psychoanalytic, and I would say that they are supported in turn by three 'pillars', each lying somewhere between thesis and hypothesis. These are not always exposed and explicit – more like sunken foundations propping up the rest:

1. The concept of death – if a concept it be – remains for necessary reasons beyond our conceptual reach, despite the prodigious

intellectual effort spent to that end, and yet we can maintain a certain thinking relationship with it.

2. Freud's notion of the 'death-drive' in all its counter-intuitive force still stands as perhaps the critical imperative in the field of philosophies of death in modern times, and as such demands painstaking elaboration and interrogation.
3. The death-drive bears an inward relation to what we think of as 'aesthetics', namely those objects and experiences related to pleasure, form, involvement and alienation that sport a special cultural mark upon them.

Does that read like a late modernist agenda? Many of the primary ingredients are there – death, psychoanalysis, art. Late modernist or not, it still bursts with issues and questions that we are still only at the beginning of. Take only Freud: his work comes in and out of fashion, praised and blamed, but either way it provides a capital so constantly and so ingeniously reinvested, be it negatively (American feminism, for example) or positively (poststructuralism), that it becomes hard to imagine a real end of Freud, that is not just that point at which various thinkers and writers declare the end (always a sign of its continuing vigour), but where his work no longer prompts criticism or reference. That seems a long way off. Where would debates around our times be in the absence of a more or less tacit reference to Freudianism? Can we imagine a modernity without some invocation, albeit subtle, displaced and equivocal, of the unconscious? How would we fare if we could not avail ourselves of this term or the range of meanings it imparts? Has the unconscious – manipulated, to be sure, in a variety of psychoanalytically doctrinal and post-doctrinal ways – not come to form some kind of predicate to the way in which we anatomiise the social, political and intersubjective world? Even in its most dilute form – that of implicit subjective knowledge – the 'concept' of the unconscious continues to influence our propositions regarding action and thought in the human dimension. And as for the death-drive, to say nothing of the larger question of death in general, it has a pertinence that flies at the body as well as the mind, attacks us as beings and provokes us in a relentless and quite uncontrollable way, whether we let it or not.

### **The unthinkable**

A moment ago, looking at Fritsch's sculpture (in fact a copy of a photograph of it), I mentioned a non-appearance strangely bound up with the

'visit' or visitation of death. When we see death happen, we never see death as such. Of course, I can think *about* death. I can think about the deaths of certain people; I can speculate on a life beyond; I can enumerate the things that will no longer be present; I might even be able, in a squinting sort of way, to picture a nothingness. But death as such never makes itself present. Its peculiar non-appearance – in a Heideggerian vein one might refer to it as death's withdrawal – has far-reaching consequences for our sphere of knowledge as human beings. The fact that death, in some strong sense, does not appear – even when it appears to, so to speak – establishes a limit both to our knowledge of death in particular, but also, consequently, to the empire of our knowledge in general.

So where is death when death takes place? Perhaps nowhere – perhaps 'death' is just the lazy, aggregate name we give the set of circumstances surrounding someone's ceasing to live. Perhaps there is no death at all, merely the stopping of life. Yet this stopping is unlike any other. It's not like stopping the car at the end of the drive or stopping a subscription to a magazine, which are contingent events more or less in one's control. Even events that lie beyond one's control would still be contingent to the extent that they didn't absolutely have to happen. But the stopping of life had or has to happen, incontrovertibly and non-negotiably, and it is here, in this necessity, that the unthinkable resides.

Let us say, as a first fence-post in the snow, that 'thought' takes place where some innovation has occurred – a new combination in consciousness of data, a change of conceptual state, some recomposition of noumena. By contrast, if all I do when allegedly thinking or engaging in thought is to repeat a formula, then I cannot be said to be thinking. For example, if in admonition I quote to a friend the proverb, 'People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones', I am not thinking so much as parroting a sentiment – I may have brought the sentiment to mind and applied it appropriately, even skilfully, but I am adding nothing to it. There is no dialectic in the phrase for me, so to speak, nothing that has made it active, no tension. I am merely mouthing a cliché. Saying this, of course, upholds a deeply conservative argument with its roots in Platonism. It corresponds to saying that to study History properly one should avoid cramming lists of monarchs, because that doesn't get you *thinking* about history, it just equips you with a mechanical skill and a means of passing exams. But we can extend the argument to what we could label the 'epistemology of death'. One way of doing this would be to espouse the Derridean claim that the quotability of words so informs them that authentic, owned, intentional, conscious speech is never fully achievable – because each word and phrase I use may be quoted again,

and will have always been subject to such ‘grafting’, as Derrida puts it, that I can never fully own what I say.<sup>5</sup> To this extent I could never own, nor by extension truly know, the list of monarchs I may want to rehearse. The quotability of that list deprives me of its knowledge . . . Be that as it may, my hypothesis says something different: the reason that thinking about death can’t be possible is that thought constitutes a form of freedom, whereas death is nothing if not freedom’s end. Only when it deviates from a predictable or programmable deduction does thought begin, and in this respect differs from what we call ‘logic’ and perhaps even from ‘reason’ in general. For each kind of logic has barely greater status than a convention or norm. ‘Two plus two equals four’, for example, has the ring of logic but, once we appreciate other, competing logics, begins to look arbitrary. Mathematically it may be logical, but in George Orwell’s *1984*, for example, two plus two equals whatever the Party wants it to equal. Or, according to psychoanalysis, two plus two might equal a psychological representation that fits with the psyche at hand: it might equal ‘orange’, for example, or ‘my memory of school’, which mathematically may be preposterous but would psychologically be right and to that extent ‘logical’ for a given person. Obeying the rules within a logical convention, be it mathematical or otherwise, amounts to no more than precisely that; thought has not yet taken place. What does take place under the name of logical thinking would therefore be less a case of a thinking person operating the concepts or terms of the logic at hand, and more a case of that logic operating the person. For thought to be thought a real manipulability of concepts or terms will be requisite, which means that thought has to be counter-conventional. Up to that point, whatever we call thought is largely the practice of a more or less adept but ‘unconscious’ or complicit application of conventional rules.

I argue the point in Chapters 2 and 5, ‘The Death-drive Does Not Think’ and ‘Literature – Repeat Nothing’, where thought turns out to be a rare commodity indeed. After all, how often do we deviate in any meaningful way from a conventional logic or the ‘grammar’ of thinking through which we communicate? From a psychoanalytic perspective it would even be preferable *not* to think, because to think would occasion the kind of challenge, novelty, exertion and difference that the ego is always at pains to forestall. The ego wants an easy life, whereas thought, as here defined, places upon it a burden. What’s more, if thought implies breaking from convention, then around that prospect of thinking gather certain cultural or societal risks. Thinking might jeopardise one’s belonging to the group, with all the real and imagined dangers that implies. It might involve going out on a limb, even embracing some sacrificial role. Yet on the other hand, psychoanalysis – at least

in my reading of it – construes the ego as a laudably ‘thinking’ entity. The ego does want an easy life, no question, but it also wants a pleasurable one, a need which taxes it with the never-ending task of appraising and calculating where it will get that pleasure from. You may say this kind of obsessive hedonism doesn’t count as ‘thinking’ in any noble or dialectical sense – it certainly has none of the feeling of free, democratic intercourse, the gradual development of social enlightenment or the perfection of the mind that are all associated with thinking – but it does make of that ego a subtle, quick, alert, precise capability responding in real time to micro changes in its pleasure-environment – which may as well be thought under another guise.

In this almost feral form of thinking, we – at least the egoic part of us – will indeed be ‘thinking about death’, but not in any philosophic or discursive way. We will be constantly negotiating our preservation and pleasure, but the thought of death as a grand metaphysical object washes away beyond our view. Again this is because death sinks back into the cloak that necessity throws over it. To understand this invisible necessity, imagine three orders of freedom of thought, with death at the apex:

1. At the lowest level, a fairly unencumbered freedom of thinking exists – the kind of thinking that, within the bounds of convention, allows us to think about this or that: no special injunction, beyond such convention, proscribes the liberty of our thoughts. We might think banal thoughts about the shopping we need for the weekend, or subtle thoughts about the nature of colour – indeed, pretty much all of our thinking takes place at this level.
2. At the next level up, our freedom encounters the constraint of law. The law ‘Thou shalt not kill’, for example, does not prevent us from thinking about what the law means, what killing is, our moral responsibilities, and so on – we can continue, in other words, to practise a great deal of our base-level thinking in relation to it – but at the same time, qua law, its function with regard to thought is to neutralise it. You’re not supposed to think about it, you’re just supposed to do it – it’s the law, and *ipso facto* holds a kind of diplomatic immunity from thought’s confrontations. The law can’t exactly stop us thinking about it in the ordinary way, but because it’s law there’s a point at which that ordinary thinking becomes irrelevant and must give over. Its lawness, having been established, spares it from the sphere of negotiation and the thinking that goes with it. Just to be clear: no law like this, no matter how universal, ever eradicates the possibility of thought around it, ever excludes the chance of

resistance or ‘thinking resistance’ or even thinking-as-resistance to it. Equally, no law will ever achieve the absoluteness of force to finally preclude or prevent the non-compliance that begins the moment that thought, rather than obedience, responds to it. And yet, despite this leakiness in its structure, the law is law only when thought is controlled, limited, proscribed, prohibited, constrained by it. In this respect every law speaks with two voices for, in addition to asserting its own particular edict (‘Thou shalt not kill’, ‘Thou shalt have no other gods’, or whatever) it also whispers, as a kind of reminder inscribed within it, ‘and by the way, don’t think about this’. One might object that laws are created in the first place out of thought and sober analysis, but, once set down, part of the function of law must be to paralyse thinking. So at this second level an awkward structural tension plays over thinking and its space to perform.

3. But at the next level, the apex, that tension has disappeared, and it’s precisely why and where thought reaches an impasse. With death arrives a law of a higher order. ‘Thou shalt die’ has never needed to be set down as law. What can thought do to play against it? How can it resist, object, intervene, negotiate? It’s not even as if thought – as in the previous level – has been *excluded* from the scene; rather, it holds no place at all, not even the place of exclusion. It keeps all its other freedoms, its lower-order freedoms, but on death, thought simply has no purchase. At this level, thinking and law pass each other by, without relation. The unsurpassable necessity of death’s law disables all thought in a gesture of total privation, with the paralysis started up at the previous level now complete. Voiceless and futile, thought stumbles against its own boundary in the shape of necessity.

This last point is important to bear in mind in when considering death and the death-drive: death is not an object but a law, and these are quite different. The reason that thinking about death defeats, amazes or confounds us lies not in its being an unusually intractable concept, one that stretches our ratiocinative capacities to their limit, but in its having no conceptual profile, lacking both phenomenal and noumenal features. Which is not to say that proxies for thinking about death cannot be found – we have metaphors and personifications and narratives and images aplenty – but proxies are all they ever will be, and no metaphor will ever ferry us across to the real thing. Death has no *Ding an sich* even though, as Kant might also say, the metaphors do help us to think about it – or at least, they help us to think we can think about it, even though we can’t. Where death goes, thought may follow with its metaphoric

lights, but the darkness that is death's necessity will always consume them. It boils down to saying that the thought of death is impossible, and therefore death has never been thought and no thought of death has ever been had – not once.

But we don't have to take that as the last word. Despite the impossibility of thinking death, we are human beings – I should say human animals – only as subjects of the law *Thou shalt die*. We will die, and so we bear a relation to that necessity. It may not be based in thought, but it is there and it cannot be gainsaid. But if not based in thought, what is the nature of that relation? To answer this, one might reach for existentialist language. One might say that though incapable of thinking death, we suffer the fact, idea or affect of death in fear and trembling. One might analyse the game of ultimate stakes involved in the relation to death, attempt the calculation of life's meaning and value vis-à-vis a beyond, describe the economy of that speculation. An existentialist register such as this – and I am thinking of the great existentialist philosophers, from Pascal to Kierkegaard to Nietzsche to Sartre – can take us a long way in appreciating death's affect, and it may furnish the tools to measure ultimate values, but these are also its limitations. By transliterating death into a token, a marker of value against which, for example, faith or reason can be weighed, it staves death within an essentially fixed scale of permutations. It makes death legible at what is, after all, a somewhat pragmatic or ethical level, providing an indication of how best to live one's life under the conditions of mortality. Not a great deal of difference applies between this methodology and that of approaching death by way of metaphor and image, for in both cases death as such has not been thought, but rather a value has been assigned to it that gives it some conceptual substance and makes it workable. That is all well and good but I believe, by contrast, that despite its unthinkability one can still approach death without pulling such tricks of transliteration; that for all its unthinkability, for all its necessity and incommutability – and without recourse to existentialist gestures – death may be thought; and that the impossibility of thinking it does not, perversely, precludes its possibility. How can this be?

We cannot think death because thought requires some freedom or latitude that death cannot grant it. We can claim some freedom by thinking existentially or metaphorically about death, that is by buying transliterations or tokens of death that give it a working thinkability, but the cost of that freedom is a loss of immediacy that puts us at a remove from it. Nor, on the other hand, could death be said to be a 'thing in itself' available to apperception, so even getting back to some immediacy wouldn't help – death would not suddenly reveal itself. Where does that leave us?

I know I must die, but I can't really think about it as such. However, I am indebted – I have my life on condition that I pay for it with my death, which means that I am in debt. One could even say that 'I am' is shorthand for 'I am indebted'. A gap opens, in this debt, for observance and recognition. This does not mean that literally I observe my debt – by undertaking minor rituals, for example, or offering libations – nor that I recognise it in any cognitive fashion. Rather I am bestowed with a deep attitude of observance and recognition towards it – one might even call it respect. Insofar as I am indebted, I respect my death, but this respect goes on at a different level from existential cognition or affect – it's not something that ever becomes an object of thought either. And this is where the thought of death becomes 'thinkable' again, even in its impossibility. For this fundamental observance, recognition and respect entail, alongside the absolute acceptance of and obedience to death's necessity – alongside, that is, a kind of infinite passivity and slavish vulnerability to death's power – a second, irregulable element that makes these things (observance, recognition and respect) what they are. For observance to be observance, recognition recognition, and respect respect, some minimal agreement or consent must have been given on my part – in other words some freedom must have belonged to me – even in the midst of my utter lack of choice or freedom in the face of death. I am absolutely indebted to death for my life, but in the observance of that debt, and in my recognition of and respect for it, I have also established a relation and I have also offered some consent – not in any intentional way, to be sure – in order for that debt to stand as debt. It is here in this prior freedom and consent – everywhere bound by constraint and debt – that I locate a different kind of thinking of death, and perhaps a different order of thinking altogether. There's nothing I can do to bring this state of affairs into consciousness, and to that extent I will never 'think' it according to any accepted usage of that term, but my position of freedom as represented by the consent I give means that some live relay is at work between me and my death and in it I am 'thinking'. (Chapter 4, 'White Over Red', was trying to understand how artworks are capable of 'thinking' too.)

Patently, such 'thinking' has little in common with the manipulation of concepts ordinarily denoted by the word, and its field of operation is highly circumscribed. But it seems to me that one can hardly think about death without thinking about the thinking about death, for death stirs up and antagonises the field of epistemology possibly more than anything else we could cite. At the very least, it forces us beyond received ideas about thinking as a form of instrumental or technical control of matter – as if it were another form of industry. In short, death makes us think, but in ways we have barely begun to understand or articulate.

## The death-drive

Freud's work on the death-drive provides a frame of reference throughout the preceding pages, of course, and though the phrase *death-drive* has pretty much entered common parlance, its edge has blunted, and I think is worth trying to restore its sharpness, however momentarily.

It is startling, and startlingly perverse. *Death-drive. Todestrieb.* Why, other than for reasons of honour (military, political, religious, etc.), would one drive toward death? For the death-drive refers not to a wish for the death of others but of the self. Yet this attraction never comes before us as desirable as such; even for Freud, it would be impossible for anyone ever to want death; and even in cases of honour, it's the honour that's desirable, not the death as such. Chapter 3, 'A Subject Is Being Beaten', develops the point but let us remind ourselves briefly: the ego could never, strictly speaking, solicit death for itself. The ego wants only to preserve itself, perhaps to expand or to reproduce itself, but above all to avoid the 'unpleasure' of which, presumably, death would count as the arch example. This explains why, despite an emerging theory of the death-drive, Freud has such a ticklish time accounting for suicide. How could even one suicide ever take place if, as psychoanalysis contends, the ego without exception finds ways of doing what's best for itself? Freud answers that the suicide does not actually kill the self but a representation of something or someone else that he or she taken on. For example, an adolescent boy might kill the child he believes his father hates and whom the boy embodies. The boy's actions must be viewed as sadistic, outward-focused, directed away from the true self and towards this adopted or conferred image.

So the death-drive, first and foremost, must be sharply distinguished from suicide despite the fact that it concerns the death of the self. Nor, on the other hand, does the death-drive signal a death-wish in the form of willing the death of others. 'Self', however, stands out as the problem term because it yokes together unconscious and conscious motives whereas, for Freudian psychoanalysis, it is precisely the separation of the two that creates the original possibility of a death-drive. The ego, consciously, will never and could never court its own death, but that doesn't tell the whole story. The death-drive begins with and in the unconscious. A death-drive asserts itself and motivates us, but not consciously – indeed the concept of a death-drive cannot work without the complementary concept of the unconscious, that is an agency in the psyche structurally at odds with conscious or avowed intention. At a methodological level, the death-drive even has an analytic function, in that it decouples unconscious from conscious and affirms their difference. Having said

that, the death-drive marks a crossroads not only where unconscious and conscious diverge, but also where they come together, for what the ego ‘consciously’ seeks is identical to what the unconscious seeks too, meaning that conscious and unconscious blend once more – though not into any autarkic ‘self’.

And just to remind ourselves, for one last time, of the original words:

In the theory of psychoanalysis we have no hesitation in assuming that the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle. We believe, that is to say, that the course of those events is invariably set in motion by an unpleasurable tension, and that it takes a direction such that its final outcome coincides with a lowering of that tension – that is, with an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure. In taking that course into account in our consideration of the mental processes which are the subject of our study, we are introducing an ‘economic’ point of view into our work.<sup>6</sup>

Freud intends to make a step ‘beyond’ the pleasure-principle, and in an almost ingratiating, brokering manner, keen to manage his reader’s expectations, he starts in this opening paragraph of ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ to build his case. Psychoanalysis is nothing without the theory of wish-fulfilment, here identified as the pleasure principle, and this keystone is invoked as if reconfirming first principles. Somewhat surreptitiously, however, Freud appears to have switched his definition of the wish from positive to negative, whereby the mind at the centre of those ‘mental events’, now flipped to reactive or passive mode, responds to ‘unpleasurable tension’ that must be ‘lowered’, rather than seizing the initiative to pursue pleasure off its own bat. The definition is the same but different – not pleasure but the absence of unpleasure, the glass half empty – and once that subtle adjustment has been made, all else follows. Some see in this shift of emphasis from 1919 a sign of postwar pessimism, but whatever its context, only a short step or two now stand in the way of an irresistible conclusion: the ‘lowering of that tension’ knows no limits – and why after all would one lower unpleasurable tension only so far? – and so, ineluctably, it arrives at the lowest tension of all, the absolutest inertia, that is death. Freud has in effect drafted a syllogism: (1) the mind wishes to avoid unpleasure; (2) the avoidance of unpleasure is best represented by death; (3) therefore the mind wishes for death.

To speak for a second the language of chaos theory, one would have to keep revisiting this opening paragraph in order to understand the ‘sensitive dependence’ of the theory of the death-drive upon these ‘initial conditions’. That is, the theory of the death-drive would not indeed be possible, or at least as apparently felicitous (despite Freud’s egregious



Katharina Fritsch, *Mönch* (1999) © DACS 2009. Reproduced with permission.

hesitations), unless that first conversion of the wish, from active pursuit to reactive avoidance, had been effected. To be fair, Freud does write, in the quotation above, of 'an avoidance of unpleasure *or* a production of pleasure' (my italics) as if exchangeable like for like, but still that production of pleasure derives from a lowering of tension. Mental activity,

though just as skilled and sensitive and agile as we were portraying above, now resembles the work of a night watchman who rouses himself only to dampen down any minor disturbance and restore the stillness of the night. All stimulus to the mind appears as hostile in that, *even if friendly*, it creates agitation that by definition causes it unpleasure (such hostility-in-friendship would play into Derrida's work on related themes).<sup>7</sup>

So where does this bias derive? Why an 'initial condition' that presupposes hostility rather than amity? Despite the advanced and speculative nature of 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', one can still hear in these issues of stimulus and defence the kind of neurological disposition toward mental activity that had been Freud's professional bent for decades beforehand. In such a context, the 'mind', as a system of neurones, takes on a fundamentally responsive attitude to external stimuli. By and large, the greater or more unannounced the stimulus, the greater the mind's sensitivity and the greater the subsequent need to reset the mental machine to zero. Conversely, the more frequent the same kind of stimulus the more easily received, even if its first advent had been traumatic. This is why repetition becomes an ally of pleasure, for regardless of what gets repeated, malign or benign, repetition is enough by itself to decrease psychic stress. The mind may experience the same old bad news as bringing equal pleasure as good new news, and people get very comfortable with their pain.

Intent on its vigilant lowering of tension – that absence of unpleasure that signals total stillness and silence – the pleasure-principle now constitutes a death-drive in everything but name. Or does it? Is the pleasure-principle actually a death-drive or simply *like* a death-drive? And if the latter, what would a death-drive be that is other than the pleasure-principle, yet similar enough to be likened to it? Or indeed, what if the two were entirely alien to one another? The quietus for which pleasure incessantly strives equates, in Freud's mind, to 'death'. What does this mean? One of my more persistent challenges to Freud throughout this book has been that the death indicated by him falls short by some measure. Despite his likening the death-drive to the Buddhist search for Nirvana – where 'nibbana' means 'extinction' – Freud invokes more consistently and more pointedly the state of simplicity characterised by the single-cell organism. Nor is this some expedient on Freud's part: when he speaks of the death-drive and the return to simplicity, he means that human beings, owing to a phylogenetic imperative, unconsciously wish to go back to that unicellular state and reap there the benefit of its pleasurable minimum action, or more precisely the minimum action that must be pleasurable *de facto*. A remarkable thesis, but the death referred to does not amount

to extinction. Freud still ringfences the egoic psyche from any aggression perpetrated by itself upon itself. The violence it nurses will always get directed externally, and by the same token any hurt it suffers will come from elsewhere – and even that would afford an opportunity for the reduction of unpleasure and the circling back to stasis.

Now, Freud does not always practise perfect hygiene over the brood of terms under his guard, and the death-drive, in his vocabulary, will from time to time get muddled up with the ‘instinct for destruction’. Chapter 4, ‘White Over Red’, went into some detail over this question: when Freud talks about destruction it refers to an aggressive urge aimed at others, and when he talks about the death-drive it refers mainly to the phylogenetic or ancestral pull towards quietude. Then there is the ambiguity (to say the least) in the relation between the death-drive as Thanatos and the pleasure-principle as life-drive or Eros. At one level, the conflict between these is more apparent than real, in that both support psychic preservation – both set their sights on maintaining some core ‘being’ of the psyche, if we can use such language. The ambiguity persists, and it is twofold: firstly, the erotic urge, unlike the death-drive, seeks expansion and unification with others even though, like the death-drive, a yield of pleasure results from such forays, the character of which will once more be relatively de-agitated and serene, ergo deathly; and secondly, even destructive or inimical acts often involve the sensuous approach to the other that makes it hard to classify them separately from erotic interest – not to mention that the erotic approach to the other may justifiably be misprised (or judged correctly) as hostile, inasmuch as it will seek to incorporate or annex that other in a suspiciously assimilative gesture. At a more ambiguous or complex level still, one could, where Freud demurs, argue that even the purely destructive, thanatological instinct, that is the drive to annihilate others, may be erotic not just in its approach to and contact with the other, but also at the point of having ‘achieved’ its aim, that is killing someone or something else. That is because the destruction of the other can be viewed as just another mode of incorporation, and thus a gesture of love, no less. Such ‘ambiguities’ are not, in psychoanalytic terms, susceptible of resolution – and this marks a critical sense in which the order of the psychic differs from the order of the rational. It may not be rational to speak of a loving destruction, but psychically the ‘ambiguity’ holds true.

But what of the *drive* in the death-drive? *Drive* translates *Trieb* very well – indeed they are the ‘same’ word, as we know, the English converting the ‘t’ and the ‘b’ into ‘d’ and ‘v’, according to the rule. But the translation sheds no light. Even if one could define the drive satisfactorily, one would still be left with a classic philosophic problem. Namely, what drives the

drive? And what drives what drives the drive? An infinite regress opens up like a lift shaft. One might venture that the drive of the death-drive is self-causing, but that would be to grant agency to an abstraction, even a kind of transcendental status, that Freud, I think, would veto. Again he favours a biological or organicist idiom, using 'death-drive' synonymously with 'death instincts'. The compulsion or underground force suggested by the drive of the death-drive imbues the instinctual life of human beings as a species, and it is at the level of the species, precisely, that the drive takes hold. More accurately, the drive works by affecting the individual human being with the imperative of the species – as if genetically programmed, as we might say today. That is one way of understanding the 'drive-ness' of the drive, as the belonging of the individual human to a higher or more general order of being. We are driven as human beings by belonging to the order of human beings, perhaps. The belonging, or generic binding, brings us into the realm of compulsion.

At this point or thereabouts, many critics and commentators part company with Freud, of course. It's not just the kooky biologism that rankles, but also the apparent relegation of an otherwise free human subject to the status of an animal enslaved to phylogenetic urges. My own objection, and one I have hinted at here and there, pertains more to the death-drive's largely teleological nature, whereby it comes to form the alpha and omega of human existence, the dust from which we come and to which we shall return. Like so many of Freud's theses, that of the death-drive takes the ternary structure of a significant origin followed by a period of dormancy and an ultimate return to the origin. Wishes, for example, begin as egoic desires, undergo repression and then reappear, albeit disguised as symptoms; Freud's work on Moses posits an original figure, a latency period and a subsequent return in some form; and the death-drive, following suit, originates with the single organism, evolves into complex living being and then harks back to its genesis. Of course, multiple variations and nuances attend the structure, but *as a structure* it predominates. One could even argue that a part of the drive-ness of the drive, a modicum of its force, issues from the circularity itself, for it lies in the nature of 'driving' to intend towards something and circularity pulls intention forward *ipso facto*. One effect of such a structure, of such a grand design shaping our ends, is that it never punctures the daily experience of human being; it provides an overarching framework, but as such doesn't impinge in any tangible way. What I have tried to reason, by contrast, is that the death-drive, even on Freud's own terms – especially on his own terms – makes small unanticipated appearances in a legion of circumstances. In other words, the architecture Freud erects around the death-drive has a kind of metaphysical security that keeps

that death-drive in order and thus fails to notice the local, random, disruptive incursions it makes. These are what I have tried to bring out.

Not that Freud doesn't sometimes entertain such wayward epipsychidia. In his work on the repetition compulsion (I refer back to Chapter 5, 'Literature – Repeat Nothing'), Freud again introduces a force apparently more powerful than the pleasure-principle, whereby, as mentioned above, we repeat things in order to avoid the discombobulation associated with doing something new. When we do this we are, in effect, deploying the psychical logic of the death-drive, though Freud prefers to emphasise the tactical function of repetition in people suffering mental disorder. These people unconsciously repeat traumatic events they have experienced either in a displaced form (as symptoms) or in a stylised and somewhat abstract replaying of the trauma itself, because to relive them as such or to confront them presents such an overwhelming prospect. The compulsion to repeat, however, keeps that trauma alive even if it does come out in distorted form, so that any palliative effect can never be more than superficial. The link to the death-drive, however, never becomes that salient in Freud's writing, but to me it's critical, and it manifests itself on at least three counts:

1. *Reduction*: by repeating something I will among other things be defraying the considerable cost upon my psychic system of taking on something new, which means I will be obeying the death-drive's prerogative of keeping psychic outlay to a minimum.
2. *Sameness*: the lack of variation in my actions or their effects connotes 'death' inasmuch as it marks a refusal to grow or to change, that is negating a fundamental affirmation of being as being in time and with purpose; repetition is 'anti-life', if you will.
3. *Technology*: the more repetitious I become, the more regular, predictable and 'functional' I become as a body, even though as a mind my dysfunction becomes painfully evident. Obsessive actions display a mechanical quality, and indeed in a certain 'real' sense repetition makes a machine, a technical object, out of me. In other words, I start to look more inanimate than animate.

This last point, about technology, is critical when approaching the aesthetic, for a formidable link exists, as we were hinting in relation to Katharina Fritsch, between technology, art and death – a link made visible by Freud's work, though not exhaustively investigated by him.

Behind all these manifestations, just as behind the superordinate death-drive that transmits at the metapsychological level, an insoluble element, present in what we were nicknaming the 'drive-ness' of the

drive, endures. The repetition compulsion constitutes a kind of drive too: the phrase translates *Wiederholungszwang* where 'Zwang' denotes compulsion or force. Perhaps it translates in turn the kind of necessity that we sketched out in relation to freedom of thought – an unscaleable 'there is'-ness. In both cases we are dealing with something difficult not to express tautologically, yet in both we may isolate a certain priority or what Derrida might call an 'affirmation'. While the death-drive cannot not be deathly – notwithstanding Freud's rather emollient attitude – nevertheless it is there and it is 'productive'; it has energy and direction; it holds tension; it tilts forward, so to speak, in its imminence. Even before it 'appears' as the death-drive (which it never really does), before it diverts the human species towards its death, *because* it is a drive it will have prepared itself, will have affirmed the possibility of the emergence of something rather than nothing.

No sooner do I say this, however, than I ought to whittle out anything purposive – or 'teleological' to use that term again – in such a positioning of the death-drive. I do not wish to imply that this meta-drive or hyper-compulsion has the same conditioning and programmatic vocation as that of the death-drive considered from Freud's phylogenetic perspective. The drive-ness of which we are speaking supports, but diverges from, that agency which magisterially guides the human being back to its organic destiny, being rather a feature of the death-drive qua drive. In this regard, the phrase 'death-drive' signals an oxymoron, where the drive, as a kind of prior acquiescence to action, overrides or at least vies with the putative inaction of death. Such acquiescence might bear comparison, moreover, with the structural consent by which I mark my respect for death's absolute necessity. If we can speak of a drive, even knowing that it serves death, then, no matter how far back in the chain, an unquenchable energy gives itself.

### The aesthetic, again

The principal texts under analysis in this book are of course those of Freud (and various post-Freudians), but with strong representation from writers such as Heidegger and Derrida, and more than passing reference to Adorno, De Man, Durkheim, Foucault, Pascal and Nietzsche. In addition to these, I have looked at a modest range of aesthetic works, including photography, painting, literature and of course Katharina Fritsch's sculpture. These deserve their place in the possibly unlikely context of a book about the death-drive neither for being especially 'deathly' nor especially 'aesthetic' – and no doubt countless other works

could have served as well – but because in each case I find an intensification – perhaps exemplary, perhaps not – of that nexus I touched on above, combining the technical, the formal, the repetitious and, yes, the deathly.

That's one side of it. The other reason for their inclusion concerns the quality of the fictional, the rhetorical and the imaginary that they exhibit, a quality which, in my eyes, contains a neglected yet critical strain of the death-drive, and it is this that I have placed special emphasis upon. In short, one can consider the death-drive philosophically, and one can consider the death-drive psychoanalytically, but its consideration from an aesthetic viewpoint remains, as an approach, comparatively immature, and the means of advancing that approach lie on the two sides just mentioned.

My assumption is that no object devoid of a formal element can claim aesthetic status – which is not to imply that anything with a formal element must automatically be aesthetic. What do I mean by a 'formal element'? Well, I distinguish between form and genre. Thus a play counts as a genre, and a farce counts as a sub-genre of the genre, and a bedroom farce a sub-genre of the sub-genre. In photography or painting, a landscape could be a genre. In music, an opera. Within these one might come across vignettes, or arias, or soliloquies, or adagios, or epilogues, or cropping, or flashbacks, and so on, each of which legitimately might ask to be described as a formal element, at least insofar as each would be a recognised device. Equally, at a micro level one might encounter anaphora, or backlighting, or stichomythia, or glissando, or impasto, each of which, again, could qualify as a 'formal element'. But what I have in mind is something less empirical and less technical. By saying aesthetic works avail themselves of a 'formal element' I mean they are discrete, bounded or framed in such a way as to affirm their specificity. Just as they include certain elected or at least hosted elements, so they exclude others. Their borders will be keen, protective, delimiting; the concentration of forces at the frame between inside and outside has singular intensity. In this special sense, they are 'formed'. Obviously I wouldn't want to imply that, at an artistic level, a great deal does not get transacted between an aesthetic work and what lies beyond it. Paintings allude to other paintings or texts, a photograph of one place may refer to a second place, and so on – one can be persuaded easily of a multiverse of quotation and intertextuality at this level. But while the aesthetic work finds itself moored pretty tightly, and by a web of interconnected lines, to all manner of other texts, agents and events, at the same time that work will enjoy a detachment deriving precisely from its singularity, from its bordered-ness and unicity. The work is nameable and can be singled

out. Even with a text of multiple editions – Shakespeare's *King Lear*, for example – the object, as a 'work', can be named. A couple more provisos: saying the work tolerates (and perhaps even demands) being named and singled out, even in the midst of multiple texts like those of *King Lear*, or among the various performances, say, of a piece of music, does not mean it benefits from transcendental or essential qualities. I am not claiming the nature of a particular work presides above the various manifestations of it as their truth; I am not positing an inner kernel of the work in relation to which any edition or performance or representation would merely append. But if I may make a distinction nevertheless between such editions and the work they are editions of, I would say that while the borders of such editions or 'texts', hospitable or not, may be quite frangible, the borders of the work to which they relate remain impassable and clear, and that these function to segregate that work as distinct – despite all the miscegenation on the textual plane – from all others. Thus when we refer to *King Lear* we refer not only, if academically informed, to this or that edition, or, if less informed, perhaps to a generalised '*King Lear*' as the net of various encounters with it (reading it, hearing it quoted, seeing a production or whatever), but also to a kind of declaration on the part of the work itself that marks itself out as such: not a secret truth, but an open, if not empirical, declaration of independence.

What has this got to do with the death-drive? Recall the figure of *Mönch*. Fritsch's sculpture has the quality of an eternal recurrence – an 'eternal return of the same' whereby, despite the variegated lights new contexts will shine upon it, this sculpture steadfastly remains this sculpture. At a certain level it cannot absorb those contextual lights, merely reflect them while it keeps dark. I do not think this unique to *Mönch*. Last night, for example, I watched a TV programme about the pyramids in Peru. Thousands of clay pots have been recovered from the various sites, most of them decorated with figural art – depictions of rituals and the like. As you might expect, the programme offered contextual detail from the period in order to help the viewer understand the art in question. But for all the contextual cladding and the nuances of interpretation and counter-interpretation, one could still detect a 'this is it' of a particular pot or vase, a kind of pre-empirical 'ecce' announcing the completeness, even in the case of fragments, of the work. Such an abiding formal element, which accompanies but stands back from the stock-exchange of interpretations about it, begins to merit the status of death-drive on account of its stillness, its intactness, its immutability. Once made, the artwork cannot change or grow, even though its meaning will undergo endless manipulation by and adaptation to the

needs of successive interpreters – analysis interminable, to paraphrase Freud. Or, to paraphrase Melanie Klein, the artwork must be seen as a dead object, though clearly not in the Kleinian sense – the artwork has been formed, completed and finished; the process of its production at some point has stopped and left it on its own; it is no longer being created or nourished. Even in musical performances, which require the reanimation, so to speak, of the original score, the artwork will be complete right from before the first bars of the overture. Which is not to argue, somewhat classically, that each part relates to the whole work as an aesthetic unity, but rather that the work – as a complete ‘object’, and as the issue of its author, regardless of how complex or various that author might be – has fully ripened before the performance. But its existence, as a mode of completion and detachment from its author, will still be that of a dead object.

The asymmetry I mentioned at the beginning, between artwork and beholder/recipient, comes from this. I can recognise an artwork but it cannot return the favour. The provocation goes one way. The artwork therefore traces a hermeneutic circle around itself, a *cordon sanitaire* which my approach or address to the work will never penetrate. This does not mean that my hermeneutic interest will meet with any hindrance: on the contrary, such interest will not only continue to be unfettered – and after all, how could the artwork *itself* ever police the responses and advances towards it? – but the very energy for hermeneutic engagement with it may be sourced from the *nec plus ultra* of this dead zone. Because, in other words, I cannot assimilate or comprehend the deadness of the work – and we are a million miles from claiming that its deadness is some roundabout way of talking about it having an essence – I am moved to respond to it, as if under some injunction to inculcate life where it is most threatened or barren. Paradoxically, that deadness, with its own kind of silent voice, actually incites or provokes. But as deadness, as the completeness it is, it cannot engage with the dialogue resulting from the provocation. It hangs heavy and inert, like any other object.

Within this deadness of the artwork, another engine cuts in, however. The artwork neither adds nor takes away anything from itself (a feature I would advocate as definitive), but it lasts. The fact of its being finished, the fact of its having been let go by its creator(s), means it can suffer no further dereliction or deterioration. Even if the object itself fades or decays, is cannibalised, adapted or renovated – a crumbling fresco, a bleached-out celluloid, a cracked altar panel – the work lives on as the unassailable and minimal quantum it has been since its manufacture. For it has indeed been *made*, developed in close proximity to the body

of a person or persons, but its making reaches an end after which it is forever released, like an astronaut cut adrift in space. Such endurance, such *conatus* as Spinoza might term it, constitutes the drive of the artwork's death-drive, its striving-in-sameness, its undeviating persistence. Unfortunately, words like 'endurance' and 'persistence' may point to a temporal habitat for the artwork, but the quality at hand, the quality of the drive, pertains less to time – it is not a temporal aspect of the artwork – than to its singularity or to its having-stood-out-as-itself. In short, a drive not to change – not because only such a drive could withstand the corruptions of time – but to be what it is. Once manufactured, the artwork possesses, like an unresisted will, its endeavour to be the same as itself. Don't take this as a restatement of the eternal identity of the ideal aesthetic work, but as something more straightforward: it was made, it is unique, it will last, even as it changes.

Although my description of the drive-ness of the drive would not necessarily violate that in Freud (I refer you back a few pages), my thesis regarding the artwork manifestly perverts Freud's statement of the death-drive on many scores, and not least because the artwork, contrary to the organicist Freudian model, must number among the least organic forms imaginable. That 'madeness' of the artwork had to involve an intervention into or departure from organic or natural creation, as a specifically man-made, technical, deliberative feat. Artworks don't just appear, although of course one can appreciate the 'artistic' qualities of natural phenomena like sunsets or sand dunes, and one can name or claim nature as art, of course. Aristotle says something along the lines that the work of art is not necessary or that it could have been otherwise, which I take to mean not only that it did not have to happen, but that it is unnatural. The artwork is never called for, so that although, to pick an example, Picasso's *Guernica* takes its cue very directly from events in Francoist Spain, and Pablo himself may have felt a powerful urge personally to comment on them, *Guernica*, as an artwork if not as a piece of political critique, lies outside the call of history. It was occasioned by history but not demanded by it. It had to be possible for it to be created, in other words its contingency was necessary, but contingent it nevertheless was – for having supervened technologically, appeared artificially, marked an 'unnatural' incursion, as something we could have lived without.

This is the first sense in which the artwork might be 'technical', and already it links to death for, like death, the artwork intrudes into the order of the organic; even where it represents the organic, even if its own material be organic (clay pots, for example), the artwork belongs somewhere other than the order of natural life – not that it has a natural

domicile either. (One might contest whether death belongs to the order of the organic, on the grounds that death arises usually as the result of an organic process . . . but at the same time one would have to acknowledge such a result takes the form of the *annihilation* of organic life, even so.) We could also invoke the more common-sense understanding of the way in which an artwork might be technical, depending as it does on the technological skill or technique of its maker – but this needn’t detain us here. So again let us recall Katharina Fritsch’s *Mönch*, where we talked about a ‘rhythm of death’. The artwork sustains itself without changing – a deeply inorganic capability – which speaks to a machine-like persistence, technical for never diminishing, never wearing itself out. A kind of infinity inheres in it. At one level, this is deathly because of the lack of change, as we have said, because of the inertia, involved. The rhythm of death, however, the formal or technical insistence within that deathliness, concerns the drive behind it. For the inert, deathly, inorganic persistence of the artwork requires an energy of sorts and a constant reaffirmation. It cannot simply persist – some form of imperative drives it. An infinite renewal is at play, driving the persistence of the artwork which, because of the ever-present need for that reaffirmation, constitutes a kind of rhythm or pulse. The dead beat keeps it going.

So much for the formal/technical side of things. I also flagged up the fictional, the rhetorical and the imaginary. I make again the point that death must anyway be fictional. Because death never happens as such – that is, because the most we can witness will be the ending of life rather than death – it never becomes actual. So rather than an actuality, Heidegger describes it as a possibility. In my terms, this means that it relates to us as a kind of fiction, accessible only through tropic projection and imagery, such that we speak and think about death *as if* it existed, though it doesn’t. Paradoxically this suggests that while death possesses the ultimate potency of absolute necessity, we have to invent it before it can be registered. And, as we were saying earlier, the necessity of death renders it unthinkable anyway, thus shifting us from epistemic appreciation of it towards this more fictive attitude. True, death would still occur even without this albeit second-order apprehension of it on our part, but insofar as we can relate to it at all during our lives it requires a kind of invention to make it (not thinkable, to be sure, but) imaginable. Death, the final reality, affects us as pure fiction. Immediately, therefore, it throws itself open to aesthetic reception and manipulation, ready to be dressed up at the imagination’s whim. The power of death has to work mainly upon the imagination, making its force, the point at which it ‘touches’ us, more rhetorical than actual. Indeed, one could defensively construe death as the most perfectly rhetorical ‘entity’ we know,

since it furnishes no other presence or representation for us than at the rhetorical level, where it arms itself with a battery of rhetorical devices.

We should, however, add a clause to the effect that the contrast between rhetorical and actual is a lot more fuzzy. Death *never* becomes actual, for it calls an end to the very order of actuality itself (time, events, action, etc.), so that its rhetorical nature could never work as a proxy to that actuality, nor indeed maintain a relationship with actuality of any kind. Despite the fact that death must be *anything but* rhetorical it is *nothing but* rhetorical, in effect. Nor does this peculiar quasi-reality stop, in my view, at the rhetorical manifestation of death, but spreads widely, perhaps everywhere. I would go so far as to say that not only does death manifest itself in such rhetorical quasi-reality but that *most* of our ‘reality’ might be quasi-real and rhetorical and that this makes it deathly. The chapter entitled ‘A Harmless Suggestion’ fleshed out this hypothesis in terms of psychoanalytic suggestion. Suggestion generates realities at the level of the imagination, working rhetorically to persuade a given person – or to expedite their self-persuasion – of a particular figuration of (what I hesitate to call) the real. If I am suggestible, I will countenance and even encourage the rhetorical figures and figurations of my life that bring me pleasure and that I will experience as real or true. Well, there appears to me no reason why the mechanics of suggestion should be limited to suggestion only. Insofar as we inhabit socially a psycholinguistic environment saturated with rhetorical devices and suasive manoeuvres, and, once in it, look to align external realities with internal pleasure, we may constantly dwell in the valley of the shadow of suggestion, constantly prone to the rhetorical or ideological forces forever reinventing and repositioning us. We develop transient strategic identities at the interstices of tropes, in other words – a situation I would describe as deathly for at least two reasons. Firstly, if suggestion has the rhetorical power to configure or reconfigure the identity of any given person in any given moment, it means that any identity preceding the moment of suggestion lacked the wherewithal to withstand suggestion’s insinuating approach. The identity lacked substance, in other words. Not that the new suggestion bestows any such substance – on the contrary, the ‘subject’ of suggestion will achieve at best gossamer identities easily dispelled and replaced by ensuing suggestions. I consider this insubstantiality to be deathly – and the rhetoric of suggestion, perhaps rhetoric in general as the art of persuasion, implies a destructibility of the subject under its spell, a deathly breakability furnishing the precondition of its being able to be reformed as necessary by rhetoric’s wiles. The art and the aesthetics of rhetoric need a base in that destructibility of the subject

– the beauty of words grows up around that desolation. And secondly, that deathly seduction by the trope in all its artificiality still works by pleasure. The Freudian line on suggestion says that we take on suggestion because the content of what's suggested harmonises with some inner image of our own pleasure. I am revising this line. I say that if suggestion holds the power to refashion me as and when, then I lose the link to my own pleasure and to my pleasure-history, so to speak. But there can still be a pleasure-effect or pleasure-affect without such a link. Pleasure may work precisely as an interruption of my own history, and suggestion may cut across rather than coincide with any inner self. Again, this implies a kind of deathly undoing.

In sum, the rhetoric of death works upon me in two ways, both of which confuse and blend the realms of aesthetics and ontology. First, for all its sway over the realm of actuality, death can only ever play upon us at a rhetorical (and to that extent, aesthetic) level. Second, the field of language I find myself in – the ‘sociolinguistic’ field, for want of a better term – will be criss-crossed everywhere by suggestion and persuasion, the consequences of which are profound: suggestion and persuasion depend on a reinventability and structural openness of the person (or ‘subject’) they work upon, an openness that is on the one hand generative and creative, but on the other hand violent and terminal.

It occurs to me that there might be both conservative and radical readings of what I have written in this Postscript. In what I speak of as the respect for death, as the affirmative drive-ness of the drive and as the bordered formality of the artwork, my reader might well see a series of transcendental essays at anchoring a set of properly unruly discourses – philosophy, psychoanalysis and aesthetics. Another reader, however, might see in the same place an almost delinquent empiricism that puffs up the obvious – like the fact that an artwork has been made by an artist – in order to blow those discourses far off course. Whichever it is, I think both derive in turn from what I would call the ‘no remote control’ effect of the death-drive. Our fundamental, and perhaps distinguishing, capability as human beings to control and manipulate things from a greater or lesser distance reaches its limit in the case of death which is both infinitely close to and infinitely far from us at the same time. No active, technological, controlling, human distance can be installed by us between us and it. It rushes everywhere before and behind that wished-for distance. Strangely, however, this infinity of death (the death-drive perhaps would be the name of that infinite rushing) that streams around us and defeats any remote control of it on our part, also leaves us, by the same token, completely free. *Because* we cannot control it at any distance we are free from it; the death-drive confers upon us both radical

bondage *and* this radical freedom. Within it, we are constantly walking away from it. What I hope this book has done is give some expression to that experience.

## Notes

1. Specifically I am referring to Jacques Derrida's *Mémoires pour Paul de Man* (Paris: Galilée, 1988).
2. W. B. Yeats, 'The Statues', *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London and Basingstoke: Papermac, 1982), pp. 375–6.
3. Paul Celan, 'The Meridian', trans. Rosmarie Waldrop, in *Paul Celan: Collected Prose* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986), pp. 37–55; Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Shocken Books, 1968), pp. 217–251.
4. The sculpture also forms part of a trilogy or trinity with two other of Fritsch's works. These are *Händler* (*Dealer*), 2001, and *Doktor* (*Doctor*), 1999.
5. See, for example, the essay 'Signature Event Context', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), esp. p. 317.
6. *SE*, XVIII, p. 7.
7. Jacques Derrida, *Politiques de l'amitié* (Paris: Galilée, 1994).

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